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# interzone

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY ☆ ISSUE 218 ☆ OCT 2008 ☆ £3.75

**Chris  
Beckett**

three stories plus interview

plus other stories by  
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**Daniel Akselrod**  
& **Lenny Royter**  
**Tim Lees**

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on Saturn's Children

more interviews, news,  
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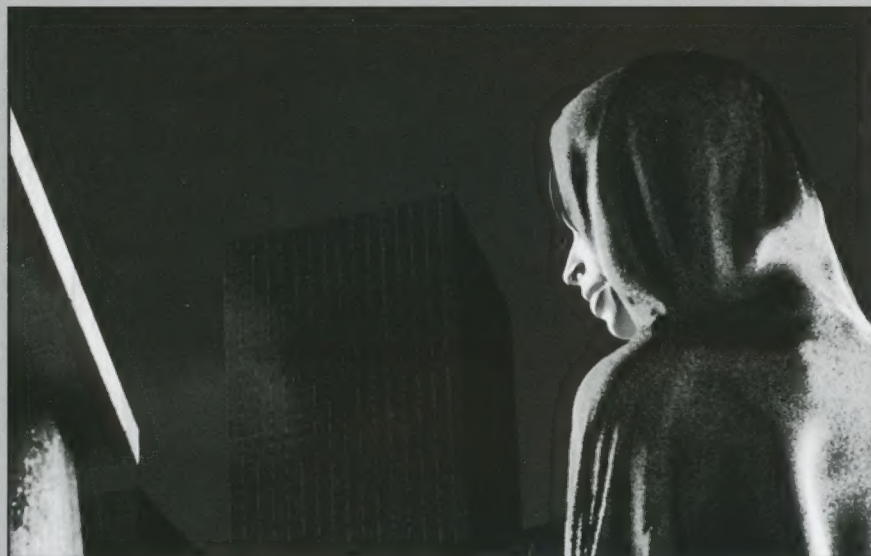


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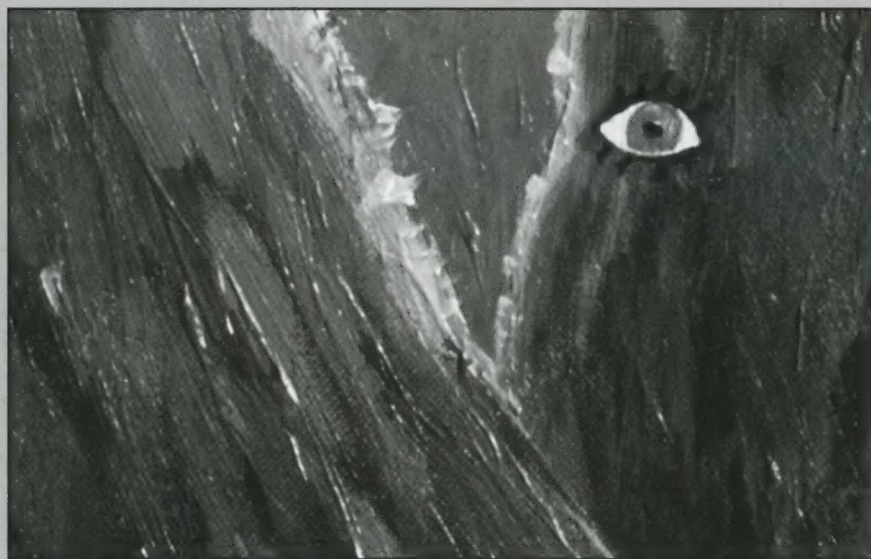
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**Rudy Rucker**

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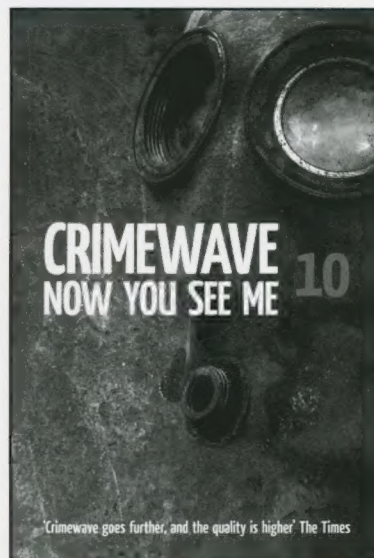
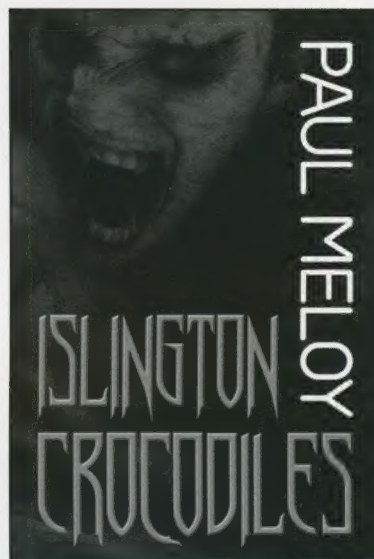
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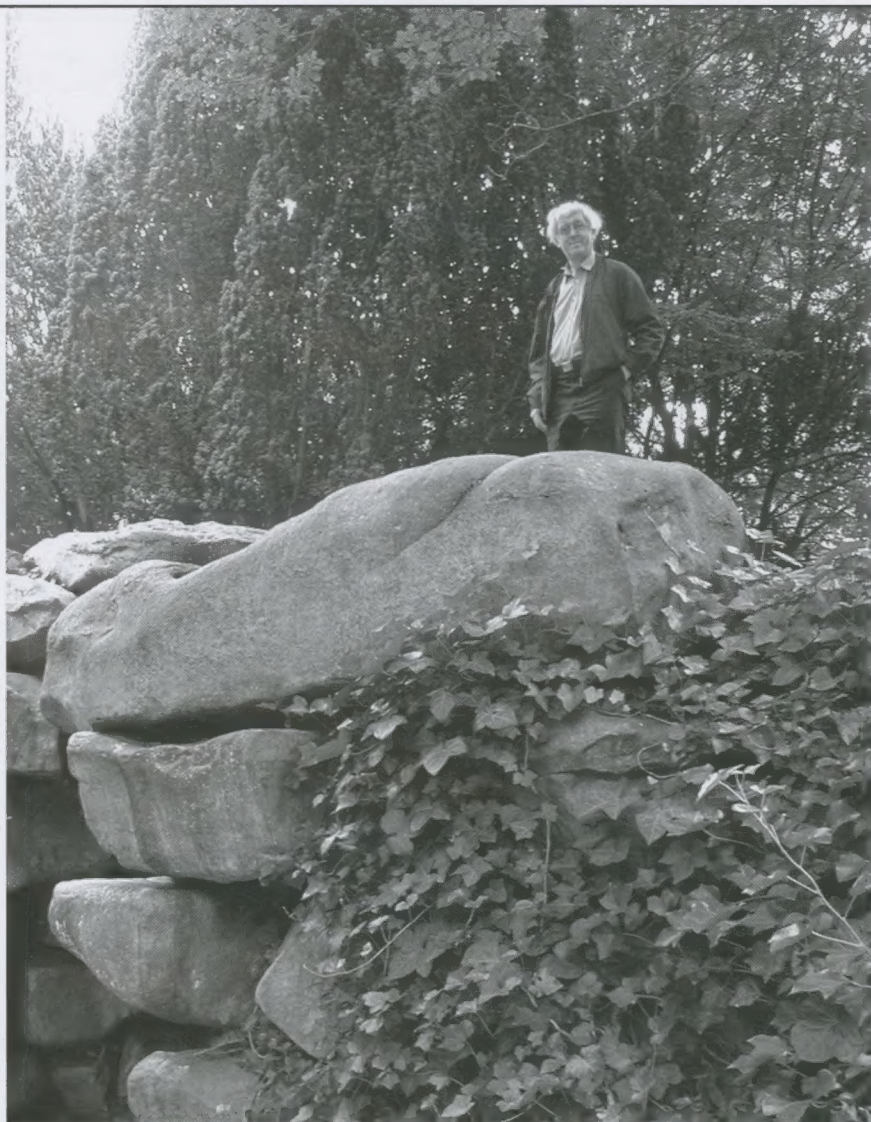
## EDITORIAL

At the time of writing many overseas subscriber and contributor copies of issue 217 still haven't arrived. I've tried to find out why but I'm afraid I have no useful information to pass on. Please contact me by email or via the forum, let me know if you've received your copy or not, and please visit the forum regularly for updates. I hope the copies aren't lost and that we don't have to do a very costly reprint and resend, but if that's what we have to do... Meanwhile, sorry, and thanks for your patience.

Hopefully we'll have a more reliable international mailing service in place for this issue, which is a Chris Beckett special. Chris was an *Interzone* 'discovery' in 1990 and went on to publish a further 18 stories here. We recently received three more quality stories from him in quick succession, so we decided to run all three in the same issue (illustrated by Vincent Chong, Warwick Fraser-Coombe and Daniel Bristow-Bailey), along with Chris's own introductions and an interview conducted by Andy Hedgecock.

This issue we officially welcome Jim Steel, who has taken over from Paul Raven as Book Reviews Editor. We're looking forward to working with Jim – and some new reviewers too, as our team expands – and thank Paul for all his hard work.

As mentioned last time, our free biweekly podcast *Transmissions From Beyond* has now gone live. You can subscribe via the TFB website feed or places like iTunes. Pete's done an amazing job, that's some very professional audio right there. If you agree, please spread the word. Thanks!



Hugo loser contemplates death plunge

**Hugos.** A 19-year winning streak ended at the World SF Convention in Denver, Colorado: is 'No Hugo For Langford' newsworthy? Novel: Michael Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*. Novella: Connie Willis, 'All Seated on the Ground' (*Asimov's* 12/07). Novelette: Ted Chiang, 'The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate'. Short: Elizabeth Bear, 'Tideline' (*Asimov's* 6/07). Nonfiction: Jeff Prucher, *Brave New Words: The Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction*. Dramatic, Long: *Stardust*. Dramatic, Short: *Doctor Who*: 'Blink'. Editor, Long: David Hartwell. Editor, Short: Gordon Van Gelder (*F&SF*). Artist: Stephan Martiniere. Semiprozine: *Locus*. Fanzine: *File 770*. Fan Writer: John Scalzi. Fan Artist: Brad Foster. Campbell Award: Mary Robinette Kowal.

**Publishers & Sinners.** The (US) SF Book Club, with other clubs owned

by Bertelsmann, is being sold off to the investment firm Najafi Companies (Phoenix, AZ). • Wizards of the Coast is cancelling its 'Discovery' line of original, non-game-spinoff genre novels.

**As Others See Us.** Traditional opening to a UFO news story: 'If you still live with your parents, wear a zip-up cardigan over your collar and tie, have enamel badges in your lapel and don't get out much because you're too busy curating your collection of Star Trek memorabilia, it has been quite a week. While the rest of the country has been fussing over such trivia as Zimbabwe, you've been tabulating the latest activities of forces beyond our galaxy.' (*Independent*)

**Philip K. Dick's** *Four Novels of the 1960s* is the fastest-selling volume in the Library of America classics, with 23,750



# ANSIBLE LINK : DAVID LANGFORD

copies shipped in its first year and only 5% returns. First-year sales of their H.P. Lovecraft collection were 11,860.

## More Awards

*Campbell Memorial*: Kathleen Ann Goonan, *In War Times*. • *Cordwainer Smith Rediscovery*: Stanley G. Weinbaum. • *First Fandom Hall of Fame*: Mike Ashley, Ray Harryhausen. • *Life Achievement*: Ray Bradbury (SF Poetry Association), Alan Dean Foster (Association of Media Tie-In Writers), Harry Harrison (SFWA Grandmaster), Peter Straub (International Horror Guild 'Living Legend'). • *Prometheus* (libertarian): Harry Turtledove, *The Gladiator*, and Jo Walton, *Ha'penny* (tie). • *Sidewise* (alternate history). Long: Michael Chabon. *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*. Short (tie): Michael Flynn, 'Quaestiones Super Caelo et Mundo' (*Analog*); Kristine Kathryn Rusch, 'Recovering Apollo 8' (*Asimov's*).

**Astronomy Masterclass.** 'In 2006, Pluto was classed as a minor planet. Unlike the planets, it has an elliptical orbit.' (Helpful factoid added by HarperCollins at the back of Diana Wynne Jones's *The Game*, 2007)

**George Takei** was among the first to invest \$70 in a wedding licence when California lifted its same-sex marriage ban on 17 June. There's always a party pooper: Orson Scott Card denounced this new freedom as 'the end of democracy in America' and hinted that right-thinking folk should react by overthrowing the US government and its 'insane Constitution'.

## As Others See Buckminster Fuller.

'Fuller's themes often had the hallucinatory quality associated with science fiction (or mental hospitals).' (*New Yorker*)

**Diana Wynne Jones** urges us to support 'Philip Pullman, who is objecting furiously to the publishers' unilateral attempts to label every book that *might* be for children with the age-range for which it is putatively intended.' See [Notoagebanding.org](http://Notoagebanding.org).

**Ridley Scott** on his influences: 'I was never really able to get into sci-fi, I found it intellectually artificial, though truly imaginative.' (*Guardian*)

**Magazine Uproar.** Briefly: a writer with an insecure grasp of net etiquette made public his rejection letter from *HelixSF*. com co-editor William Sanders, which categorized Muslims as 'sheet heads'. Much debate ensued. A few *Helix* authors withdrew their work: the irritated Sanders variously said they couldn't, asked \$40 per removal, replaced pages with 'Story deleted at author's pantiwadulous request' and informed protesting contributor Yoon Ha Lee that hers was a story 'that never did make any sense and that I only accepted because I thought it might please those who admire your work, and also because (notorious bigot that I am) I was trying to get more work by non-Caucasian writers.' Oh dear. Some *Helix* writers and ex-writers set up a rival on-line magazine: Transcriptase.org.

## Thog's Masterclass

*Dept of Cybersalesmanship*. 'This is the

Model 899D57...the newest and the best. The cyb circuit can analyze a sequence in half a minute, give or take a few seconds... There are flashing lights, too - all over the board.' (Frank Belknap Long, *The Strange Tomorrow*, 1966) • *Morning After Ray Bradbury Dept*. 'The green feather of nausea blew through his intestines as if, during the night, he had polished off a keg of dandelion wine.' (Jeffrey Ford, *The Cosmology of the Wider World*, 2005) • *Dept of Dynamic Cartography*. 'The meridian drifted at a thousand miles an hour across the Pacific...' (Bill Napier, *Nemesis*, 1998) • *Use of Weapons Dept*. 'Nothing short of a machine gun could have stopped Gog in his first outburst! He was finally subdued with tear gas.' (John Taine, *G.O.G.* 666, 1954) • *Heredity Dept*. 'Walmsbury, not yet nineteen, had inherited the effulgent brouhaha of his strain.' (Noel Langley, 'Scene for Satan', *Saturday Evening Post*, 1947)

## R.I.P

**Chingiz Aitmatov** (1928–2008), noted Kyrgyzstan (FSU) novelist whose sf story *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years* (1980, trans 1983) describes a Soviet/US space mission, died on 10 June aged 79.

**Pauline Baynes** (1922–2008), UK illustrator most famous for her line drawings in the Narnia books, died on 1 August at the age of 89. She also illustrated *Farmer Giles of Ham* and other Tolkien books, painted the first paperback cover of *Watership Down*, and won the Kate Greenaway Medal.

**Ljuben Dilov** (1927–2008), prolific Bulgarian author sometimes called the father of Bulgarian sf, died on 10 June.

**Thomas M. Disch** (1940–2008), US author and poet who began publishing sf in 1962 and gave us many darkly brilliant short stories and novels, committed suicide on 4 July; he was 68. His finest novels were *Camp Concentration* (1968), *334* (1972) and *On Wings of Song* (1979); the latter won the John W. Campbell Memorial Award. His last blog postings - including a slightly shocking 'Ding-Dong! the witch is dead!' send-off for Algis Budrys - can still be read

at [tomdsdisch.livejournal.com](http://tomdsdisch.livejournal.com).

**Geo W. Proctor** (1946–2008), US author and teacher whose many books included some 16 sf/fantasy novels and two co-edited anthologies (one of Nebula winners) died on 3 August.

**Jonathan Routh** (1927–2008), UK author, artist and broadcaster best known for the UK *Candid Camera*, who ventured into comic alternate history with *The Secret Life of Queen Victoria* and *Leonardo's Kitchen Note Books* (arguing that all da Vinci's sketched fortresses and engines are food-related), died on 4 June aged 80.

**Jack Speer** (1920–2008), long-time US fan who produced the first history of fandom, *Up To Now* (1939), and the original *Fancyclopedia* (1944), died on 28 June aged 87. He was a fan guest of honour at the 2004 Worldcon.

**Tartan Films** (1982–2008), influential UK movie distributors who imported much notable Asian horror including the Japanese *Ring*, went bankrupt in June after months of difficulties.



## INTERVIEW

FORGOTTEN GARDENS, FORBIDDEN FRONTIERS AND THE BURDEN OF IDENTITY

Chris Beckett talks to Andy Hedgecock about the mysteriousness of the world and the critical issue of what is chicken and what is egg

"We all know the moon is a ball of rock circling the Earth, but if you ever find yourself looking up at a full moon and you suddenly realise that it really is there, that you and that vast ball of rock really do both exist in the same universe, and there really is nothing solid in between it and you...that's another thing entirely. And you realise in such moments the real world is just as mysterious and astounding as any imagined one.

"Writing is a process of discovery. Factual knowledge is 'out there' knowledge, separate from you. *Understanding* is when you imaginatively grasp a thing and it is no longer just 'out there', so you abolish the distinction between 'out there' and inside yourself. One of the really magical things about being a writer is when you spot something in one of your own stories that you didn't know was there. I'm sure other writers will agree with me. Often I don't know what stories are really 'about' until later."

The Cambridge-based writer Chris Beckett's reflections on the wonder of the natural world and the mysteries of the creative process illuminate distinct but complementary tendencies in his storytelling. On the one hand he is a modern mythmaker who creates new and bewildering worlds, rendered with sustained clarity of vision and impressive levels of imaginative detail. And, on the other hand, he is a literary shaman who seeks strangeness in everyday reality and reveals unsettling facets of the quotidian world.

"Of course everyone – writers and non-writers – experiences this when they look back at their dreams. Dreaming is a natural form of story-telling and I'd say the original, pure form. Dreams of course are not naturalistic, but weird and fantastical, reminding us that the oldest stories in the world are fantastical, like SF, and that the naturalistic form which is now thought of as mainstream fiction, is in fact a specialist genre, arguably of relatively recent provenance."

Chris Beckett has worked as a social work practitioner and is now a senior lecturer in social work at Anglia Ruskin University. He has written and co-authored

several textbooks on social work practice, child protection and human growth development. His parallel career as a creative writer was launched with the publication of a well-crafted series of SF stories in the early 1990s. He has gone on to become a regular contributor to *Interzone* and *Asimov's*, and several of his stories have been anthologised. His first novel, *The Holy Machine*, was published to strong reviews in 2004; publication of a second, *Marcher*, is pending; and Beckett has recently completed a third, *Dark Eden*, which he considers to be his richest, most imaginative and most engaging work to date.

The striking thing about Beckett's stories is their astonishing range. *The Turing Test*, his new story collection published by Elastic Press, demonstrates the sort of vitality and variety associated with writers of the calibre of Brian Aldiss and Paul Di Filippo.

Reading the short tales in order of publication reveals a voice that is becoming increasingly assured, themes that are becoming progressively more complex and storytelling that hits new heights of sophistication. Even the hypnotherapist Milton Erickson, a master of crafted linguistic ambiguity, would have been impressed by the wit and ironic layering of his most recent stories: the work he has submitted to *Interzone* this year have provoked energised discussion and proved refreshingly difficult to categorise.

Beckett isn't one of those writers determined to exhibit a cool reaction to praise from readers and critics. In fact, he's highly sensitive to the essentially social nature of storytelling.

"Well, first of all I am very touched and pleased my stories were received in that way. Some people misunderstand the process of writing, seeing it as an essentially solitary activity. But it is really all about *communication*. Readers are as necessary to it as writers.

"I would say the secret of a good story is that it is essentially *bottomless*, unlike, say, a polemic, or a factual article – but like the world itself. You should never be able to exhaust it by saying 'that's what it was all

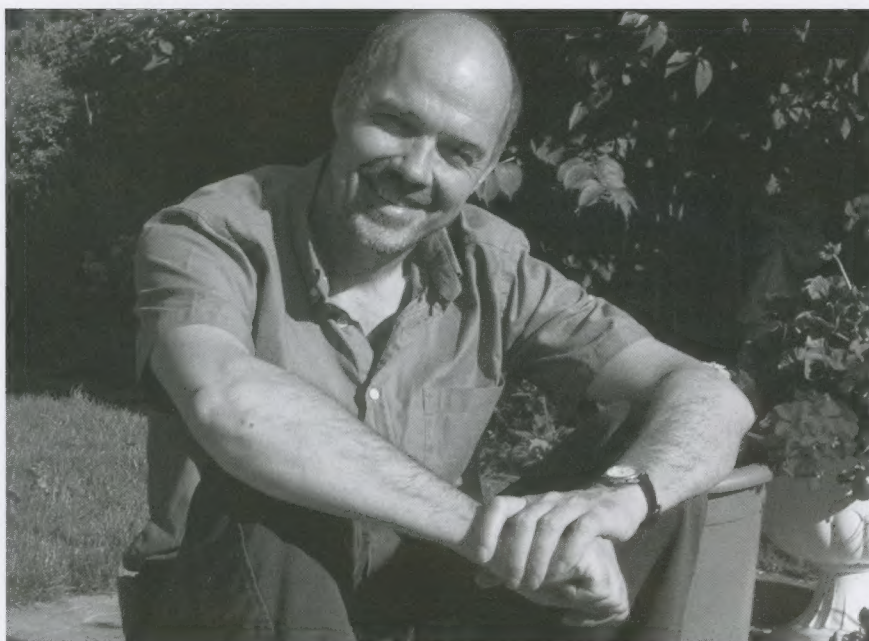
about'. Different people, or the same person at different times, even the author, should be able to find different things in a good story – and be able to do that indefinitely. All my favourite books and films are 'bottomless' in this sense. For instance, pick any one of Philip K. Dick's best novels: it would be impossible to sum up, or to agree with other people, what Dick's books are 'all about'. And yet there is absolutely no doubt at all they are 'about' things. They represent a really serious attempt by the author to communicate his understanding of the world."

So, I ask, does this quest for the 'bottomless' tale – the story with an inexhaustible range of meaning and resonance – mean Beckett is consciously and deliberately writing across traditional genre boundaries. Or is he simply picking up a fundamental idea and letting it drive his narrative along the imaginative highways and byways that happen to open up?

"My stories do just 'take me where they take me', I think, in terms of genre. On the other hand I've sometimes tried to dispense with the science fictional elements, and that just doesn't seem to work. Somehow, a robot, or an alien planet, or a parallel timeline, or virtual reality, or *something* science fictional always seems necessary to give me the leverage I need. Maybe it also gives me the distance I need from the subject matter. And sometimes it's what I need to make the story lively and fun.

"I certainly don't have any commitment to writing any particular kind of science fiction, and would happily write in other genres if a time came when that seemed to work for me. I also think the main subject of my stories is my own experience and the world around me, as opposed to say more specifically science fictional subjects such as science, the future, or technological thought experiments. But, as Justina Robson once helpfully summed it up for me, science fiction provides an amazingly powerful set of tools for externalising interior experience. Also for looking at the world from odd and unexpected angles. And it allows immense economy. You can





just set whatever scene you want and run with it. You can deliver in a couple of lines a scenario that would take pages to build up in other ways, and then just run with it.

"I read all kinds of fiction, and not particularly science fiction over any other kind, but as a writer I love science fiction. I'm drawn to the idea of marginal territories and science fiction is a marginal form, in that it straddles two spheres often seen as opposites – art and science. It's marginal in another sense too, in that it is not seen as 'mainstream'. I think that suits me."

### **Stardust and poetic hyperbole**

Notions of the liminal and marginal aspects of experience do indeed underpin much of Beckett's work. There's a key line in 'Poppyfields', one of his most arresting and resonant stories to date: 'During this visit he had noticed how larks and linnets had taken advantage of the legal impasse and had colonised the disputed territory'. And many of his stories – whether they are set in imagined places or strange versions of familiar locations – concern transformations. Places either transform physically or perceptions of them shift. So why are these disputed territories so central to his work?

"There is something very attractive to me about a no-man's land, like Poppyfields, the overgrown building site in the story, which is neither one thing or the other, but just exists. The world in which we exist from day to day often seems to be missing something. I sometimes dream of finding an extra room in my house that I didn't know was there, or a forgotten garden, or

a small country hidden away in the middle of this one, whose existence had somehow passed me by. As a child I loved to read stories about other worlds that you could get to from this one, like Narnia. Or worlds that were just different from this one, and somehow richer and more absorbing, like the wonderful imaginary Finland of Tove Jansson. Obviously this is a major part of the appeal of SF.

"Even when it comes to the news, I find myself drawn to stories about places like Northern Ireland, or Israel/Palestine, or Cyprus. I've also noticed all three of my finished novels – *The Holy Machine*, *Marcher* and *Dark Eden* – involve characters crossing a forbidden frontier. The word 'Marcher', in fact, actually means someone who lives in a border area.

"I think some of my recent stories – 'Poppyfields', 'Rat Island', 'Piccadilly Circus' – represent a shift in my stories towards a way of writing more focussed on the evocation of the world itself, the physical sensory world. In some of my other stories the background is more schematic, like the set of an early *Star Trek* episode."

Beckett sees setting as a central and defining feature of science fiction, subscribing to the notion that the invented world functions like an extra character. And we go on to discuss the notion that central to every compelling SF story is the other characters' interaction with the world itself.

"If that didn't happen, it wouldn't really be SF. And this element of SF helps explain why it suits me. It seems to me our relationship with the rest of the world

is as important as our relationship with one another. We did not make ourselves. Like that Joni Mitchell song says, 'We are stardust, we are billion-year old carbon', a lovely line because it sounds like poetic hyperbole but is quite literally true! It's something of a paradox of the modern world that, while we are better equipped than ever before to know things like that, we are prone to act as if the human world was the only thing that mattered, as if we ourselves created the universe. I want my characters' relationship with the world around them to be important."

Unsurprisingly, this relationship is central to many of Beckett's recent stories. Another salient theme is the protean nature of identity and its intricate interdependence with place. These are fictions of flux, plasticity and the complex dynamics of life and nature. I ask what drew him to this theme and why it has become such a significant thematic focus in his work.

"This will sound annoying and obtuse but the difficulty I have in answering your question clearly is that I honestly think that my stories are the best way I know of saying what I want to say about these things. Because of that I'm afraid that explanations will sound less clear than the stories themselves, or will just sound pretentious and pompous. But anyway, with that health warning, here goes..."

"Having to be one particular person always strikes me as a bit of a burden. I have 'left wing' views but also some 'right wing' ones. I have atheistic days but also theistic ones. People's attempts to assert a fixed identity, to nail their colours to a single mast, often seem to be a little artificial and forced – though of course I do understand the importance of moral integrity. I enjoy that sensation you sometimes get when you wake in the morning and, just for a moment, don't know where or even who you are. Telling stories (as opposed to other non-fictional kinds of writing) is a way of being more than one person at the same time, or expressing contradictory views without having to resolve them, and of living with them as contradictions, because the world just *is* contradictory. Or, it's a way of being someone else without actually committing yourself to being that person. I sometimes wish I'd been an actor!

"A reader who wrote to me some time ago picked out a line from my story 'Jazamine in the Green Wood' and said that it seemed to him the essence of all my stories. It concerned a character trying to 'stamp out in himself the cruel impossible



hope that opposites could be reconciled. It seems to me that in life we are often expected to choose between A or B, when really either choice seems to involve some sort of violation of who we are."

The notion of reconciling contradictory – and sometimes paradoxical – beliefs and impulses is explored in Beckett's first novel, *The Holy Machine* (2004). The book is set in a culturally, psychologically and politically splintered zone and I wonder if this focus on fragmentation relates to the psycho-social schisms and political fractures of our own world. I ask Beckett to what extent the kind of polarisation he depicts in the book relates the schisms in our own world, particularly the increasingly significant schism between hard-line rationalism and religious fundamentalism.

"I think the best stories deal with inner and outer experience at the same time and bring them together. Science fiction is an amazing medium for doing just that. After all there is really no such thing as an inner and outer world: there is just the world.

"*The Holy Machine* does reflect the polarisation we all see in the world around us, between secularism and religious fundamentalism. In fact, bearing in mind that the first draft of the novel was written in 1994, and it was completed in 1997, I think it proved quite prophetic – among other things it imagined a religious terrorist group attacking a modern skyscraper – even if I do say it myself, and even though the book didn't actually *come out* until 2004. So yes, it does express those polarisations that we all know about from the daily news. But those external divisions express divisions inside each of us. In other words, interweaving those external polarities together with the personal stories of the characters is not just a story-telling device: it is how the world actually is. Politics and psychology are not two separate things."

So how optimistic does he feel about a possible reconciliation between spirituality and reason – values that have served humanity well at different stages of our evolution, but seem to have become increasingly incompatible in the early years of the twenty-first century?

"I think it ought to be possible to live by the light of reason and yet still be in touch with the essential mysteriousness of the world, its interconnectedness, the fact that we are really *in* the world, a part of it, not separate from it, not outsiders coldly looking in. I think that is possible. In that sense I am an optimist. But I don't think we will ever reach a place where life is not

a constant struggle between opposites that refuse to be tidily reconciled. In that sense I am a pessimist.

"How well we will be able to come to terms with the physical constraints under which we live – the limited amount of water, land, atmosphere, minerals that are available for human life – is another question which I am also a bit pessimistic about, but keen to be proved wrong."

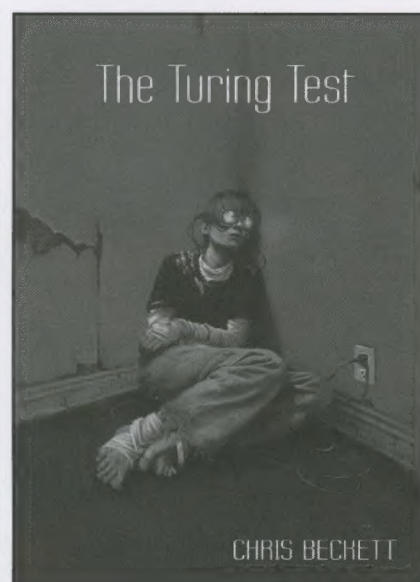
### A risky and uncertain business

In addition to these physical constraints, Beckett's work is concerned with the artificial limitations that limit our choices and determine our behaviour. Many of his stories concern alienation, loss, powerlessness and the abuses of power. So to what extent does he feel his career as a social work lecturer and practitioner has influenced his storytelling?

"Well what is chicken and what is egg? I became a social worker I suppose partly because, although I come from a reasonably prosperous middle class background, I always have, for whatever reason, identified with people who are outsiders (and have always felt a bit of an outsider myself). As a social worker I met people who live in worlds which are almost completely outside the experience of most of the population. Some people have had *awful* lives; some people are incredibly downtrodden by the rest of the world.

"Social work is ostensibly a profession which exists to support the marginalised and excluded, but which in fact has a very ambivalent role, reflected in my Welfare Man stories. Sometimes it is itself an instrument of oppression. I think being a social worker has hugely broadened my understanding of human experience, and it has also made me politically more sophisticated and sceptical. 'Doing good' at the level of politics and society is not easy. Ostensibly helpful actions can make things worse. Our own helpful impulses may conceal other needs and impulses which are not so honourable. Intervention in other people's lives is always a risky and uncertain business. One of the things that social work has taught me is that if you act in the world at all you get your hands dirty. Only those who sit outside and do nothing can claim to be pure."

Beckett's reference to the Welfare Man stories takes us neatly into a discussion of his second novel, *Marcher*, based on a short story of the same name that appeared in *Interzone* in October 2001. I ask what stimuli drove him to develop the story into



a full-length novel.

"Well from the outset it came as a pair with another story, 'Watching the Sea' – not one of my best, I must say, judged as a stand-alone story. This was itself, if not exactly a sequel to, then related to three previous stories – 'The Welfare Man', 'The Welfare Man Retires' and 'Jasmine in the Green Wood'. The first two were linked to it by the idea of 'dreggies' and fenced-off social housing estates; the last introduced the idea of 'shifters'. Subsequently a bunch of other stories emerged in the same family – 'Tammy Pendant', 'We Could Be Sisters', 'To Become a Warrior' (one of my favourites) and of course, latterly, 'Poppy-fields'. So somehow it just wanted to grow into a novel, I suppose because it linked up lots of different personal preoccupations and topical issues: the burden of identity, marginality, the longing to escape from the world, the ambivalent nature of social work and the welfare state, terrorism, immigration, political repression, social exclusion and alienation – what it feels like and what it makes you do – and so on.

"The original short story provides a snapshot from the viewpoint of one character. The novel extends this over a longer period, draws in other viewpoints, and shows both the main character and the wider world changing and developing. It includes a brutal massacre perpetrated by socially excluded dreggies under the leadership of shifters (from other universes) who have provided them with what seems like a liberating ideology (so quite topical) and the murder of one character who has appeared in several of my stories. It



## THE TURING TEST

Chris Beckett

Elastic Press pb, 200pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Andy Hedgecock

Chris Beckett is justifiably proud of *The Turing Test* collection: "I tried to avoid repeating myself too much: I was determined to make this collection as varied as possible in terms of themes, settings and genres. Some of the pieces are weird and whacky; others are set in the worlds like the contemporary world with a few little twists."

*Interzone* readers will have already encountered many of the stories – 11 of the 14 were published in this magazine first – but Beckett's worlds merit a return visit. Furthermore, the collection showcases the

increasing sophistication and richness of his storytelling, and offers the enormous pleasure of an exploration of themes of shifting identities and conditional realities through an impressive range of SF and fantasy forms.

Beckett's mystery tour takes us along the timestreams, on vast interstellar journeys and into familiar locations that have undergone surreal transformations. In the title story a hard-nosed gallery manager gives Alan Turing's legendary thought experiment a makeover to conduct a different kind of comparison between splendid artifice and passive acceptance of the quotidian; 'The Perimeter' and 'Piccadilly Circus', stories featuring the eccentric Clarissa Fall, are witty excursions into the virtual social network of a decaying future London; and 'Dark Eden'

takes us into the perpetual night of a newly colonised world through deftly worked competing narratives.

In his introduction to *The Turing Test* Alastair Reynolds expresses the hope the collection will bring Beckett, "this singularly underrated writer", a wider audience. Reynolds' lengthy and encomiastic piece offers useful insights into his fellow author's work and concerns. My only disagreement with Reynolds is his assertion that Beckett should "already be on the radar of anyone who professes concern for science fiction as a literary form." Beckett should, in fact, be on the radar of anyone who loves short fiction and anyone looking for evidence that the short story remains a vital form for addressing the uncertainties, changes, problems and possibilities of the modern world.

shows society as a whole becoming more paranoid and oppressive as a result of these events. It shows the relationship of the main viewpoint character (Huw in the short story, though changed to Charles in the novel) with Jazamine unfolding to some extent, and his own painful development of self-knowledge, and at one point descent into near-madness.

"I think it's a novel of its times, though never consciously planned as a direct commentary on events in the outside world. Hopefully it will be out towards the end of the year or early next year."

Beckett has also completed another novel, *Dark Eden*, and is seeking a publisher for it. He considers the book his best to date and feels it represents a significant development in his writing. Based on a story called "The Circle of Stones", which appeared in *Interzone* in February 1992, the book is set on a planet which is alone in space. It has no stars but is lit and heated by geothermal energy and geothermal life forms which are bioluminescent. When he explains the principles of a forest lit by its own fires, he is amused by the verbal tic that accompanies my processing on any tricky idea: "er...right."

"You sound sceptical Andy. There's something I like about this magical environment and strangely enough I read somewhere that astronomers believe a sunless planet can be warm and can sustain life."

The original short story concerned a woman and man – who had little in common and little liking for each other – stranded on this geothermal Eden as the potential matriarch and patriarch

of a new race. The novel jumps forward five generations to a point where their descendents – a single stifling community of 500 people dwell in a valley completely surrounded by high mountains. The story describes the desecration of a sacred circle of stones, the expulsion of a young man from the community and an expedition over the mountains – with the young hero and a group of fellow apostates struggling to survive pitch darkness, freezing cold and attacks by a snow-dwelling animal.

"One of my major theses is that sometimes we have to violate taboos or go against the moral codes of a society to breathe, to live. My aim was to create a society haunted by its own origin. The quarrels of the two original people of this planet are legendary. You know how children are traumatised when their parents argue? If your parents are the only beings in existence and they are violently angry with each other, that would create a major sense of insecurity for the community they established.

"I had a lot of fun imagining this whole world. There's a large cast of characters and there's more than one viewpoint character. There's a lot of drama and conflict: the community begins to break apart and death and violence come to them for the first time ever."

Beckett has also taken great pleasure in exploring the complex relationship between the present and the past. One of the people from the ship that originally landed on the planet names all its flora and fauna: in the present the community ritually re-enact the process, shouting back into the past to guide the naming process.

"It's a nice sort of circle and I've had a lot of fun with it – the past shapes the present and the present shapes the past. I'm hoping readers will get a sense of this link and that they will find it easy to visualise the landscape in which it happens."

Chris Beckett and I close our discussion with a few words about East Anglia. He reveals he came to the region more than 30 years ago ("more or less by accident") after living in Oxford, the West Country and Wales and, for one year as a child, Australia. I suggest there has been a massive burst of creative energy in the region in recent years – almost on a par with the flowering of literary talent on the West Coast of Scotland in the 1980s.

"I honestly have no idea why this is happening. I believe I'm right in saying the population of East Anglia is growing faster than any other part of the UK. Cambridge where I live is a boomtown, with smart new buildings going up all over the place. But it's a strange region. It has no major metropolises, no famously spectacular scenery and is probably the least-known part of the country in terms of regional stereotypes. Everyone in England knows what a Geordie, Yorkshire or West Country accent sounds like, but who knows what an East Anglian accent is like unless they've actually lived here? East Anglia is mainly well-known for being flat, but has its own subtle charm which you have to work at.

"If the region really is becoming a hub of creativity, then that is fine by me. I'm certainly pleased *Interzone* is now an East Anglian institution." ❧



CHRIS BECKETT

# POPPYFIELDS

"I am very proud of this story. I think it's one of the best things I have ever done, though curiously I wrote most of it a while back then gave up on it for several years. For some time I have had a strange fascination for old landfill sites. There are several big ones which I often drive past between Cambridge and Oxford, covered in pipes to remove the methane and take it away to be burnt. When something takes hold of my imagination like that, sooner or later it comes out in a story. The character Tammy Pendant, inspired by some of the tough kids I used to work with in my social work days, has previously appeared in three short stories: the *Interzone* story 'Marcher' (my most popular *Interzone* story if readers' polls are a reliable guide), and the stories 'Tammy Pendant' and 'We Could Be Sisters' which both appeared in *Asimov's SF*. 'Tammy Pendant' caused a bit of a problem for *Asimov's* because it included underage sex (not at all graphic I hasten to say), and led to demands that *Asimov's* should be withdrawn from school libraries in (I think) Michigan. Tammy also appears in the novel *Marcher*, which should come out at the end of this year."

illustrated by  
VINCENT CHONG









It had once consisted of a rundown industrial estate, a disused shooting range and a council landfill site. Now it was going to be a new housing project called Poppyfields. Contractors brought in bulldozers and diggers on the backs of trucks, put up high fences and uncoiled springs of razor wire along the top. Then the diggers began to dig and the bulldozers began to grub out bushes and knock down the remains of the firing range and the empty factory units, leaving only the concrete floors.

But when a digger started to excavate footings in the part of the site that had once been landfill, there was an unexpected development. There came a sort of malodorous fart from beneath the earth and the digger sunk into the ground to two metres' depth. The landfill site was not properly impacted, it seemed, and had not been biologically stabilised. Beneath the surface anaerobic bacteria were blooming in a rich marsh of old cereal packets and crushed chicken carcasses and leftover oven chips. It was in a state of ferment, seething with methane which bubbled up through the mush and collected in air pockets as high-pressure, inflammable bubbles.

An argument broke out between the engineering contractors, the housing development agency and the city council – who were the former owners of the land – about who should bear the cost of sorting this out. Negotiations failed. Independent arbitration could not be agreed. The contractors took the housing development agency to court. The housing development agency issued a writ against the city council. The diggers and bulldozers came to a standstill. The Poppyfields site stood empty, seeds settled on the earth and red flowers bloomed over this legal battleground as they once bloomed over the trenches and shell-holes of the Somme. Poppyfields became a poppy field.

And presently larks made their nests on the ground. Rabbits burrowed under the fence. Field mice slipped through the chain link. Tussocks of wild barley appeared. Bindweed and vetch crawled up its stems. Tiny seedlings of hawthorn and brambles sprouted here and there. Given time, they would have gradually turned the place from a field into a jungle, to be superseded in turn by oak forest. But Poppyfields did not care about the future.

Poppyfields lived its own life behind the razor wire. When it rained the water dripped from Poppyfields' leaves. When the wind blew Poppyfields' grass and flowers bent back and forth like waves in the ocean. And when the August sun shone down at midday, Poppyfields' larks twittered – on and on – in the big blank blue of Poppyfields' sky while mirages shimmered like the apocalypse over the concrete slabs which had once been the floors of the industrial units but were now the home of lizards and wolf spiders, with seedlings of buddleia already taking root in the cracks.

Poppyfields asked itself no questions. Poppyfields did not concern itself about its place in the world. Poppyfields did not wonder about the source of the energy beating down on it from the centre of the sky, powering its multifarious life. Poppyfields lost no sleep over the fact that, in due course, the County Court, or the High Court, or the Court of Appeal would make a decision, after which the houses and roads and recreation grounds would come and cover Poppyfields all over with tarmac and little boxes of brick. Poppyfields did not sleep or wake up. It did not worry. But it lived, it lived anyway, secretly, on its own, behind

the fence, feeding on the light that came to it from the surface of a nearby star.

Poppyfields lived and yet, at the same time, it was insubstantial. Not only Poppyfields but the entire universe that contained it, was really only a film, a membrane, thinner and more fragile than a child's soap bubble, stretched across a void. It was one of countless such membranes, countless millions of them, for universes are more numerous than Poppyfields' crickets and they are packed closer together than the grains of sand in Poppyfields' earth.

This was Poppyfields' secret, and yet it was an open secret. If anyone had looked through the fence at midday and seen Poppyfields there, shimmering like Armageddon in the atomic heat of the sun, they would surely have seen it. But no one did look through. Cars went past all day but no one looked in. No one came to Poppyfields until evening.

Things might have been clearer to Angus Wendering if he had been able to overhear a conversation between his wife Judy and her best friend Anne, in the week after he and she had first met.

"I know Angus is nothing special," said Judy, setting down two glasses of chilled white wine on the table between them and returning to the conversation which they had broken off when she went to the bar, "but what I've decided is that there is no sense in waiting for Mr Right to come along. The thing to do is to find Mr Average and *turn him into Mr Right*."

This would have helped to explain why Angus sometimes felt like the caged rat in some behavioural experiment. He moved this way, he received an electric shock. He moved that way, he received another. He touched a lever and – aha! – no shock came but instead a pellet of food for him in the little tray. He touched the lever again and... Oh. No food. Only an extra-painful shock. So the answer wasn't just pushing the lever. Perhaps it was pushing the lever in a certain way, or at a certain time? Or perhaps it wasn't pushing the lever at all? Perhaps it was something else he happened coincidentally to have been doing the first time he pushed it?

When Judy arranged to spend the weekend with her mother, leaving on Friday directly after work, he had a heady feeling of freedom and release. An evening and two whole days to do as he liked! As soon as he got back from work he took a knapsack and packed into it a pork pie, an apple, a Kit Kat bar and a bottle of ginger beer, along with a notebook, the *Book of British Birds* and a pair of binoculars. When the cat was away the mouse went birdwatching.

And he went, of all places, to Poppyfields. Angus worked in a clerical capacity for the insurance company used by the building contractors at Poppyfields and he had once had occasion to visit the site in connection with the dispute over the underground marsh. During this visit he had noticed how larks and linnets had taken advantage of the legal impasse and had colonised the disputed territory.

"Nature always grabs every opportunity," he had enthused to Judy on his return. "It's just a mouldy old brown-field site and already the wildlife is taking over. I'd love to go down there one afternoon and see just how many kinds of plants and animals I can find."

Judy administered a small electric shock.



"Whatever turns you on," she coolly remarked.

She wished to wean Angus off his interest in nature because (a) it wasted time which could be better spent on home improvements, (b) it did not strike Judy as very manly: *geeky* was the word that came to mind, (c) she was working on Angus to go on a management course to increase their earning power and make possible a move to a larger home than the two-bedroom box which they currently inhabited – and she wished to discourage any activity that diverted him from this goal.

He hadn't liked to raise it since and yet, when he heard that she would be going away, the first thing he had done was phone the contractors and arrange to pick up the key.

Poppyfields lay waiting. It was six o'clock and the air was still warm, though the mirages no longer shimmered over the concrete floors of the old industrial units. Pulling his car up on the grassy verge of the road that ran past Poppyfields' western perimeter, Angus walked to the gate and turned the key in the heavy padlock. The sound of the bolt drawing back sent up two quails that had been hiding in the grass nearby and Angus smiled. He was Mr Average in many ways. He would never be famous for his achievements. He would never be a leader. He had no ambition, no direction. Knowing this about himself, he had concluded that he must need Judy to supply what he was missing. That was why he put up with all those electric shocks. He was the floppy glove puppet, she was the firm hand. But he did have a certain capacity to *see* things, to become absorbed in the moment. The sudden bluster of the two quails rising went right through him, like a wave through still water. Perhaps the hand of the world itself can enter more easily into an empty puppet than into a glove that is stretched tightly over an active, commanding hand?

He found linnets, he found skylarks, he found a mistle thrush; he found three different kinds of cricket, four kinds of spider and twenty-eight different species of flowering plant; and he wrote all the names down in his notebook, for no special purpose other than to mark the occasion. After about an hour he found a place to sit on the sun-warmed concrete of what had once been a plastic bag factory and unpacked his small picnic. He was munching his pork pie when he noticed a lark alighting not far off and put his binoculars to his eyes to try and see where it had gone.

He never found the lark, though. In searching for it, he noticed something else for which there seemed no explanation. A small patch of ground began to shudder like a mirage, revealing the ground of Poppyfields not to be the solid thing that it might appear, but to be a membrane like a child's soap bubble. Angus shuddered too and he felt as if he was on the brink of *remembering* something, some huge, obvious, world-transforming thing, something that was in fact obvious to him every night in dreams but which every morning he somehow forgot in the process of waking up and adjusting himself to the strange fact that of all people, of all beings in the universe, he had turned out to be Angus Wendering, a clerk in an insurance company in a provincial town in England.

And then, in the middle of this patch of turbulence, there appeared a glimmering girl.

Universes divide in much the same way as bacteria on the surface of a nutrient jelly: one becomes two, two becomes four, four becomes eight...moment by moment by moment.

Somewhere in that broth of universes, in one of the countless worlds, someone had invented a drug that can take a person from a particular point in space and time in one universe to the exact same point in another. It came in the form of round, dark translucent pills that glowed in their cores like distant nebulae and were known by those who used them as 'slip' or 'seeds'.

The girl had taken one of these seeds in a small recreation ground in a housing estate called Thurston Meadows which, in her own world, occupied the same space that Poppyfields did in Angus's. The seed made a sort of bubble in space and time. The bubble, with the girl inside it, separated itself from the membrane that was her world. The membrane sealed itself together again over the space where she had been. With nothing of her own except the clothes she was wearing, the things in her pockets and a bag containing twenty more pills clutched tightly in her right hand, the girl had emerged in Poppyfields. Her name was Tammy Pendant. Uncared for by her parents, claimed by no one else, she had grown up in the care of the state. Restless, resourceful, trusting no one, she lived like an acrobat, skilfully balancing herself over a bottomless abyss of longing, never staying in one place, always moving on from one precarious foothold to the next before it had a chance to give way beneath her.

"Fucking hell," she muttered, looking round at the sea of red flowers – and then retched.

She got down on her knees and retched a second time, wiping the slime and the sweat from her face with the back of her hand. She had been a waif in her own world. Now she was doubly a waif. From a world where no one claimed her, she had come to a world where she did not even exist.

Then she spotted Angus.

At once, like a wild animal, she was on her feet, her eyes darting all around as she decided the best direction to run.

"Don't be scared!" called Angus. "I'm not going to hurt you!"

She began to run. But Angus was a sportsman and very fit. In a short distance he had got hold of her, pinning her arms to her sides.

"I'm not going to hurt you, alright?" he repeated. "Trust me. I won't hurt you at all. I just want to help. You can't get out of here without a key to the gate."

She looked up at him, narrowing her eyes. He was about twenty-five. He was a big man and very strong but his face with its blond lashes and thin blond beard was almost painfully open, the sort of pink fair-skinned face that blushes at the smallest provocation. She had known a social worker once who was like that. Peter, the social worker was called. He worked in a children's home where Tammy had lived. He had been completely incapable of maintaining any kind of order because he couldn't bear to upset anyone. He longed to be of help to the children, longed for them to like him, but they had all despised him, and mocked him whenever they got the chance.

"I'm Angus. I'm really not going to hurt you. Tell me who you are."

"Tammy," she muttered. "What is this place anyway?"

This felt to Angus like more comfortable ground. He relaxed



his grip, let go of her, began to walk towards the gate with her following at a little distance.

"That's a long story," he said with a laugh. "It's supposed to be a building site. There's supposed to be a new housing estate here called Poppyfields..."

And off he went, off into all the details about the landfill and the underground marsh and the court case.

"...Of course I'm not working now," he concluded. "I just borrowed the key because I wanted to watch the birds. I'm a bit of a birdwatching fanatic, I'm afraid. Sad, I know. My other big thing is rugby. I..."

Tammy stopped again to heave and retch.

"Oh I am sorry!" exclaimed Angus. "Here's me prattling away and you..."

"Is this the gate?"

"Yes," he said. "Yes it is. But listen, what are you going to do when you get outside of it?"

She looked through the gate at the cars rushing by on the bleak new road between Poppyfields and a bleak park on the other side that had been laid out on the site of an older landfill. The bright headlights and taillights of the cars were glimpses of the warm, lively places they were coming from or going to: homes, restaurants, cinemas, bars. But here inside the fence the daylight was rapidly fading and soon the only illumination would be the cold orange of the argon streetlights outside, shining down through the night. By 2am, even the passing cars would have stopped, except for the occasional solitary one rushing by through the motionless orange glow, the sound of its engine intruding for a moment to be swallowed up again by the silence.

A few tears rolled silently down her cheeks. Tomorrow she could go downtown and look for the people like her, the outsiders, the fugitives, the druggies, the people who'd grown up in care: make contact with them, start to familiarise herself with the networks, start doing deals. But she was too exhausted for all that now and she had nowhere to go.

"Come on Tammy," cried Angus, thrown into a panic by her distress, "we'll sort out something! I'm not just going to leave you here!"

She reached out, took his hand, held it tight like a small child. Never in his life had Angus felt so needed.

"I couldn't stay round yours, could I?" Tammy asked. "Not being funny or nothing. Just for one night?"

Angus cleared his throat. "Well, I..."

"Just for one night," she said. "I don't know where else to go to be honest."

"But there are hostels and things. I could phone up the social services or something. There are people who'd look after you..."

She grabbed his arm.

"No, *please!* They'd lock me up! Please don't phone no one."

Angus wished Judy were here. She'd have known what to do. She always did.

"Um, one thing," he said. "I'm just a bit worried about... Well would you mind telling me your age?"

"Nineteen," lied Tammy and she quickly added, "and don't you start on how I don't look that old because that's what everyone says."

Angus opened the gate, then shut it behind them and closed the padlock. Poppyfields was alone again in the darkness, behind the fence, behind the orange arcade. Poppyfields' bats were swooping and swerving, hunting for Poppyfields' beetles and moths. They didn't care what would happen next. Poppyfields didn't care.

"Well, perhaps for one night," said Angus unhappily.

As they drove across town, Angus considered with increasing dread the implications of what he was doing. It didn't look good, he realised, picking up a young girl and taking her home on the very night that his wife went away. It wouldn't look good even if she *hadn't* been a fugitive, owning nothing but the skimpy clothes she wore. It wouldn't look good even if he had *some* inkling about where she came from and what her history was. It wouldn't look good even if she had been ten years older, or if she hadn't been one of the prettiest girls he had ever met, or if, when she took his hand, he had not felt desire, like a sharp cold electric shock, running straight from his fingers to his groin...

"Um...are you sure that it wouldn't be better if I phoned the social services or something. I'm not sure whether it's such a..."

Tears came to Tammy's eyes again.

"Please. I just can't deal with that shit now. You don't know what it's like. It'd do my fucking head in. Just tonight. Please, Angus!"

He swallowed. He was *just* like that social worker Peter, Tammy thought, the one who kids would sometimes come up to and poke with the tips of burning cigarettes. The kids would laugh, and he'd laugh too because he couldn't think how else to handle it. Angus was just like him, she could tell, and that meant that in the end he'd do anything that she wanted him to do.

"Okay," he said. "But Tammy, it really has got to be just for one night."

They were getting quite near where he lived.

"You'd better get your head down," he muttered.

"What? Are you ashamed of me?" asked Tammy, for the devilment of it, like when they had poked poor Peter with cigarettes.

"No, no!" he protested. "Why would I be ashamed? But you said yourself people might lock you up."

"Yeah but..."

"Just get your head down alright?" snapped Angus, fear finally overcoming his other feelings, and he turned into the housing estate where he and Judy lived.

He nearly didn't get round the corner. His hands were so slippery that he could hardly grip the wheel.

Tiny as Angus's and Judy's little box of a house might be, it still had en-suite off both its bedrooms and it still had an integral garage with remote controlled doors. Angus drove right in and made sure the door was fully shut behind them before he let Tammy out, safe from the gaze of neighbours in the enclosed space of his garage.

"Wait a minute," he snapped, as she made to follow him into the house. "I'll draw the front curtains first."

Tammy waited, lighting up a cigarette.

"Oh, um, we don't actually allow smoking in the house," said Angus, coming back from closing the curtains. "Perhaps you



could just finish that out here before you..."

She crushed the half-smoked cigarette under her heel with a small cold shrug, so unlike the frightened tearful waif that he had seen beside the gate in Poppyfields that Angus found it hard to believe they were the same person.

"Do you want something to eat?" Angus said, avoiding her eyes. "Or the bathroom? I expect there's lots you want to know about...you know...this world. But perhaps that's for later, yes?"

"I could use a cup of tea. And a shower."

Tammy made herself at home. When she came down after her shower she had done up her hair, put on some of Judy's make-up and borrowed one of her T-shirts to wear as a dress. She was, without doubt, the prettiest girl that Angus had ever been alone with, the prettiest and the youngest and the most obviously available.

"Um, listen," Angus said. "I've been thinking. I promised I wouldn't report you to the authorities, Tammy, and I won't if you really don't want me to, but don't you think it might be the best thing? I mean I believe there are agencies now to help people like you, help you find a new life and all that. I mean you are welcome to stay here tonight but obviously I can't keep your existence a secret forever."

Tammy knew just how to deal with this.

"I thought you said you wanted to help me, Angus. But if you don't, well fine, I'll just walk right out of the door and you won't ever see me again. Is that what you want?"

"No. No Tammy!" Angus cried out. "Don't get me wrong. I do want to help you. I really do."

"So where do you want me to sleep?"

"We've got a spare room. I'll show you. The bed's already made up."

"Are you sure you don't want me to sleep with you?"

Angus's face flared red. He tried to laugh in the loud cheerful way that he imagined a man of the world would laugh in such a situation, to show that he knew that she was only joking and that of course he didn't have the slightest interest in her in that way. But he was convincing on neither count.

"I'll...um...show you the spare room."

Just like that social worker Peter, thought Tammy. He'd go red too if anyone said anything that might be to do with sex. Why? Because sex was something he'd never mastered, any more than he'd mastered how to deal with children burning him with cigarettes.

Tammy couldn't sleep. The slip – the shifting drug – was in her veins. She was in this world, but only on the very edge of it, with the precipice right beside her. She kept feeling that she was falling and kept grabbing involuntarily for a handhold. Vivid images and sounds rushed through her mind, of the world she had come from, the world she had arrived in, the worlds she had glimpsed in between. She saw a thicket of thorn bushes, a brick wall appearing right in front of her face, a lorry rushing towards her, a child screaming. The scenes went round and round until her head felt it was bursting. And behind it all she felt emptiness pulling at her, nothingness, that void at the core of everything which she'd always had to struggle to keep from overwhelming her.

She got out of bed and crept across the landing to where Angus lay in the dark, also sleepless, in his marriage bed with its pink cushioned headboard, under the wedding photograph of himself and his gimlet-eyed wife, and beside the pink dressing table on which sat his wife's make-up and her mirror and her three teddy bears.

"Angus," she whispered.

Angus leapt up like a jack-in-a-box, snapping on his light. Tammy was amazed to see that he was wearing blue and white striped pyjamas, like a character in some old film.

"Yes? Hello? What is it?"

"I can't sleep. I can't stop seeing things."

"Well, um, perhaps you could..."

"I'm scared of being alone. Could I just stay in here with you for a bit?"

"Um, listen, I don't think that's a very good idea."

"Please."

Tammy went over to his bed and took his hand.

"You wouldn't believe the shit that's in my head."

Again, she did not cry but tears began to roll down her cheeks. Angus could not bear tears. He put an arm awkwardly round her shoulders.

"There there, Tammy," he murmured stiffly.

Tammy slithered up against him. This didn't look good, this wouldn't look good at all.

"You're a kind man," Tammy said. "I don't know what I'd of done without you."

She snuggled up closer. She could tell that Angus was aroused.

Ten minutes later he was on top of her. Thirty minutes later he was telling her that he would give up everything for her: his magical glimmering girl who had appeared from nowhere before his eyes, and before his eyes alone.

"I love you Angus," she whispered, she murmured, she moaned, "I don't want you never to leave me." And all night she held him, and drew him to her, desperate to keep the emptiness at bay. Why had she abandoned her own world, after all, except in search of somewhere she would feel less alone?

But at 6 o'clock in the morning, when Angus had finally sunk into a sated sleep, Tammy was still wide awake. She looked down at the mild, foolish, gentle man lying beside her and gave a small snort of contempt.

He stirred sleepily as she got out of bed.

"Where are you going Tammy?"

"I want a cup of tea."

"Bring me one too then. But don't be long. I want you here with me. I want you with me always. You make me feel my life has just begun."

She went into the other bedroom, put on clothes and went downstairs. He would never see her again. Having already slipped back into sleep, he didn't hear the back door quietly opening and closing and didn't wake for another three hours. Then, seeing she wasn't beside him he flung on a dressing gown and went downstairs.

The radio was on in the kitchen.

"Tammy?" he called cheerily. "Sorry about that. I went right back to sleep."



His wife was coming home in less than eight hours time but as yet he was untouched by that fact, or by all the other things that somehow had to be decided between now and then. He was just as contented and at peace with himself as he would have been if there were no obstacles at all to prevent his glimmering girl spending every night and every day with him between now and forever. It was as if he was inside a bubble which had separated itself from the rest of the universe.

"Sorry Tammy," he said again with a laugh as he went into the kitchen. "I just went right out like a light again. It's..."

But the radio was chattering away in an empty room. There was no sign of Tammy other than the open back door, and the contents of several drawers which she had flung across the floor, looking for things which she could use or sell.

Then the bubble burst and he found himself standing instead in a ransacked ruin which had to be restored to normality in a matter of hours. He scoured the house for any possible trace of Tammy. He washed and dried the bedsheets, he swept and hoovered the ash from the garage floor. He gathered up the contents of the drawers. Of course he had no way of knowing whether Tammy might suddenly reappear, or write, or even phone and remind him of the love he had declared, the extravagant promises he had made. She had changed from his heart's desire to a dangerous stranger. And he was to live in fear of her, for days and weeks and months.

"Who is Tammy Pendant, Angus?" Judy demanded.

It was nearly a year later and Angus was in the spare bedroom painting the window frame.

Angus started, banging his head hard against the top of the window cavity.

"I don't know," he said. "Why do you ask?"

She held out a card. It was an ID card of some sort, with a photograph of Tammy looking out.

"Where...where did you find it?"

"In my magazine rack in the kitchen. Stuck in the middle of the magazines."

"Perhaps it fell out of one of them."

"It didn't."

"Perhaps we had a break in."

"A burglar who takes nothing but leaves a calling card?"

"Well it beats me then."

He turned hastily back to his painting.

"Don't you *dare* turn away, Angus! You know something about this. It's written all over you."

Angus was trembling.

"Okay," he said, "I'll tell you. I didn't tell you before because I knew you'd be angry. I went birdwatching down at Poppyfields that Friday you went to your mum's last August. She was there. She didn't have anywhere to go. She cried. She begged me to put her up for the night and I felt sorry for her and put her up for the night. In here of course. In the spare room."

"I should bloody well hope in here. She's not much more than a kid!"

"She...she said she had nowhere to go."

"Good God, Angus, I've always known you are weak willed and easily manipulated. But can *anyone* pull your strings?"

The Mr Right project had hit its lowest point. Her anger was

like an icy gale blasting through every crevice of Angus's being. And he had no resistance to it, no way of warding it off.

"I'm going out," he said.

"No you don't! You don't just run away when I'm talking to you."

"I'm going out," he repeated, pushing past her.

He picked up the car keys in the tiny hallway. Judy had followed him downstairs and now followed him into the garage.

"Don't be a *baby*, Angus."

And then: "Angus, you *are not to go*!"

He got into the car, backed it out onto the street. Judy came and stood in front of him so he roared off in reverse, lurching up and down the kerb, and then dived down a side road. He drove at random through the suburban streets until at last he found himself driving along that bleak road that passed between Poppyfields and that bleak little park. He stopped, got out and peered through the Poppyfields fence.

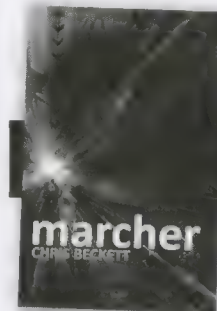
It was a building site now. The court dispute had been settled a month ago. The city council and the housing development agency were to go fifty-fifty on the costs of stabilising the underground marsh. The bulldozers had returned. Some of the footings for the new housing estate had gone in and even the skeletal frames of some of the little box houses, where one day people would do their gardens and watch TV and wash their cars, were starting to take shape. Poppyfields the wilderness had already almost gone, churned up by the tracks and wheels of the contractors' powerful vehicles.

As to the underground marsh, a specialist company had been brought in. They had identified the trouble spots and treated them, rather as a nurse might treat an infected wound, pumping down a powerful sterilising fluid into the fermenting patches and then pouring a special kind of liquid concrete in to hold everything in place. There would be no more sinking diggers, no more marsh gas bubbles, no embarrassing earthy farts.

But though they could stop the bubbles of methane and cover the skin of Poppyfields with brick houses, and drive out the larks and the poppies and the mistle thrushes, it came to Angus that there was one thing they couldn't change. They couldn't alter the fact that Poppyfields itself was a kind of dream. No one could stop the bubbles that rose up not from buried marshes, but from other worlds.

"I will leave Judy," Angus decided. "I will go back and tell her now. It will be awful but in five minutes it will be over."

Terror and exhilaration are physically almost indistinguishable. He couldn't tell where one ended and the other began. But he had made up his mind. ✧



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CHRIS BECKETT

# GREENLAND

"I'd felt a bit badly for some time that although I write stories that are almost always (notionally at any rate) set in the future, I'd never once tried to write about global warming which is an obvious real future threat. So this and 'Rat Island' were my way of making amends. Although I live in Cambridge, I come from Oxford and that's where I set this story, a steamy, smelly, crowded tropical Oxford with exotic plants creeping out from the Botanic Gardens into a permanently flooded Thames. I played around in this story with some reflections on who we feel loyal to and who we don't. I don't think human beings are fundamentally wicked but I do think our ability to really care about other people tends to be limited to a fairly small number. This makes it hard for us to respond effectively to big threats like global warming. I was pleased with the tortured Dr Brennan, who cares about humanity but can't relate to individual people at all except in a seriously nasty way."

illustrated by  
WARWICK FRASER-  
COOMBE





I was afraid once, Dr Brennan, thank you for asking, muchas gracias, but now I feel pretty much at peace. What I've finally managed to get through my head is that I'm not in the world, I've never been in the world. This little box here where my life will end – and where *your* life will end too, or so you say – it's barely a place at all, is it? It's barely separate at all from the emptiness beyond, so why be afraid of that small final step?

You can almost hear the gossamer whispers of the stars in here, can't you? You can almost feel the pulling and tugging of the invisible threads that keep the huge wheel of the galaxy turning and turning and turning, though almost all of it is empty, almost all of it is nothing at all.

Everything is how it has to be, Dr Brennan. Even a monster like you. That doesn't mean that what you did was right, whatever your talk about human destiny. It doesn't mean I've forgiven you. But I'm past forgiving and regretting and longing and wishing.

Though I do admit that I still think about Suzanne and little Maria in their ship, crossing the wide ocean to Greenland.

You want me to tell you my story? To start with whatever first comes into my mind?

Alright then, I will. The first thing that comes into my mind is green palm fronds, grey sky, bicycle rickshaws, beggars, intense heat. It's England, the High Street in Oxford, between Magdalen College and the Botanic Gardens. It's the day I lost my job at the college. It was only a few weeks ago, would you believe? I remember bustling crowds, a smell of decay, a feeling of desperation. (It's a scary thing to depend for your livelihood on a society which hates you. You have no idea.) I remember a solitary old white man, an Old Brit like you, standing on a box with the crowds pushing and shoving around him, singing in a thin quavery voice:

"I will not cease from mortal strife  
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand  
Till we have built Jerusalem  
In England's green and pleasant land."

I'd heard it before, that strange English patriotic song with its peculiar words. (What are 'arrows of desire'; what are 'dark satanic mills'?) I suppose you must know it yourself, Dr Brennan? We often heard it on the BBC, which we listened to in order to keep a track on the government and its erratic, perpetual, self-contradictory war on the immigrants like me who made up most of the country's population. But though I knew that the song was about England, it never made me think about England at all. It always made me think about Greenland: Greenland, with its green meadows and its green hills and its streams, where Suzanne and I longed to make our home.

Now, looking back, I can see that England itself *was* in its way a green place. There were green banana trees and green rice fields and green mangroves and green rushes and green waterweed up and down the swampy greenish Thames. In fact that was one of the first things I noticed about England, crawling out of the hold of the barge by the Town Dock at five o'clock in the morning: it was *green*. Back in Spain, where I came from, everything was red red red.

The very first thing I noticed about England, though, was the *smell*: the muddy murky stink of vegetable and animal waste rotting under warm brackish water.

I have a degree in engineering. I speak fluent English and passable French. I am an educated man. But when you leave your own country as a refugee – when your own country, in fact, has actually ceased to *exist* – and you find yourself in another country that resents you and feels no obligation to you at all, you can't pick and choose what you do. It was hard but I was never one of those immigrants who waste time complaining about their fate. I took whatever work was going, just as I'd done in the last famine-ridden days of crumbling Spain, grateful to have a means of earning a living, grateful to have money at all and something to buy with it. I filled sandbags round the offices of the Provisional Government, I killed rats, I sprayed stagnant pools with insecticide. Once I even had a job pulling corpses out of the Thames Marshes. (I didn't stick at it for long, but that was before Suzanne and Maria and at a time when the population of England was twenty or thirty million less than it is now, so I could still afford to take the gamble of finding other work.)

New people were coming in all the time, people from the Mediterranean, people from Africa and China and from what was left of the Indian subcontinent. They kept coming in their thousands every day. Never mind that the Old Brits fired on their boats off shore. Never mind that the Old Brits booby-trapped the beaches and machine-gunned new arrivals as they waded out of the sea. The migrants kept coming anyway, wave after wave, dodging mines and bullets, crawling under barbed wire, slipping inland and disappearing among the masses already here. Then they hired themselves out for so little that those same Old Brits who'd been willing to kill to keep them out, just couldn't resist their cheap labour now they were here. And each new wave was cheaper and more irresistible. However little pay I resigned myself to work for, someone would soon show up from somewhere who was willing to work for less.

But I thought I'd struck lucky with my handyman job at Magdalen College. The pay wasn't great but I'd known worse, and I made friends with one of the Fellows there, a physicist called Thach Pham, a guy about my own age (I'm thirty-three), whose parents had been immigrants from Vietnam. He was researching the replication of matter using resonance fields (the up and coming field according to Suzanne, my new girlfriend at the time, who trained as a physicist, though now worked in kitchens). Pham said he'd try and get me a job as a technician if he could. He said that sometimes it was possible to get a work permit if the university pulled the right strings, even though the Old Brits normally kept work like that for their own. He would see what he could do.

"My mum and dad were migrants like you," he confided, "I know what you guys have to go through."

He also promised me that he would use his influence in Senior Common Room to make sure they didn't replace me with cheaper labour. Both these promises turned out to be worthless.

Suzanne also worked at Magdalen College. She was nine years younger than me and recently arrived from France with a score of others in a little motorboat built for family holidays on the French canals. She was pretty, graceful, funny and clever (much



cleverer than me), but she was still traumatised by her losses and terrified by the challenges that faced her. She latched onto me as if I was the answer to everything. She told me I was the man she'd been looking for all her life, and for a short time I believed her, felt myself to actually be the strong, resourceful figure that she'd decided to see in me. We got ourselves a bedsit room on Walton Street, close to the edge of the great Thames Marsh. We made love every morning and every night and shared our meagre little meals as if they were royal feasts. We decided we were going to work and work until we'd somehow saved enough for tickets and visas for Greenland. There we'd rent a little farm on a hillside and grow vegetables and raise sheep and smell the sweet fresh air of a land that wasn't slowly sinking into the mud.

But we were using cheap black market contraceptives. Suzanne fell pregnant with Maria and that was the end of our chances of saving up for anything. Suddenly we had no aim in life other than keeping ourselves going from day to day.

"I'm sorry Mr Fernandez," said Mr Das, the bursar at Magdalen College, "but I'm afraid we have no choice. We can no longer afford to pay above the market rate and we're going to have to let you go unless you are willing to take a fifty Euro reduction in pay."

"Fifty Euros? But how can I? I have a baby, Mr Das, a little baby to feed. We don't ask a lot – the three of us live in just one little room – but still we have rent to pay. Please Mr Das. My daughter has asthma. Please let me carry on without a cut in pay. I already work very hard. I'll work harder. You will get more for your money I promise you. But you must have mercy on me please."

Mr Das was a tiny little Old Brit. I am not very tall myself, but the top of his balding yellowish head didn't reach the bottom of my chin. Incongruously he wore a huge grey handlebar moustache. He cleared his throat.

"As I say, that isn't an option I'm afraid."

"But Dr Pham promised me that..."

"Dr Pham had no business to promise you anything."

"He promised me that I'd be able to keep my job here. He said if there was any problem it would be sorted out in Senior Common Room."

"All the Fellows are aware of the need to reduce labour costs in these difficult times, Dr Pham included. He made no objection when I suggested this policy."

I honestly did not know how we could continue to eat and pay the rent. The new arrivals managed it by squatting in those crumbling half-drowned houses out in the Marsh, and by supplementing their diet with rats and seagulls. But if you descended to that, what would you do next, when still *more* people had arrived and still more of Britain had sunk under the sea?

"Okay, I'll do it, then," I growled. "I'll work for less. God damn it, I've got no choice, have I? I'll just have to find another job as well."

Mr Das glanced uneasily back into the inner recesses of the college. Furtively, inside his jacket pocket, he pushed a button on a pager.

"No. On reflection, Juan, I think we should let you go in any case. The new applicants will have a rather more positive attitude, I think, to the salary we are prepared to pay."

"Please..." I began, but then broke off.

One of the college porters, summoned by Dr Das's pager, appeared across the quad. In one hand he clutched a nightstick, in the other a fat automatic pistol. Bukowsky, he was called. Ugh! He was an Old Brit of the old school, his skin red and leathery, his belly hanging over his belt, his grey eyes icy with a cold and bottled-up rage.

"Fuck you, Das," I said. "Fuck your stupid job. Fuck your stupid college. A couple of years time my friend, you will all be wading around in salt water. Yes and fuck you too, Bukowsky. And as for that creep Thach Pham, fuck him as well."

Bukowsky pointed the heavy gun at me.

"Shove it, dago," he growled.

Out on the High Street, two policemen in a pedal car were passing by in front of the water-logged Botanic Gardens, from whose broken greenhouses so many kinds of exotic plant had burst out and spread across the city and up and down the marsh. Like all cops and soldiers, they were Old Brits. Paunchy and middle-aged, they wore ridiculous little blue shorts that revealed flabby hairy legs, working the pedals in unison. Sweat trickled down their red faces as they forced their way through the treacly hot-house air, nudging between hustlers and beggars and past that old man on his box, singing that patriotic song.

In theory almost everyone there was breaking British law just by being in the country, but in practice the machine gunners on the coast were the last serious attempt made by the Old Brit state to hold that particular line. Get past that and you were in, though without the protection of the law or the privileges of citizenship. You worked in the black economy. You negotiated, as best you could, your own relationship with the network of protection racketeers that regulated life below the threshold of the law. You survived or not. To the Old Brits illegal immigrants were just 'beachrats', outside of justice, a sort of vermin. So for us gangsters were the only law and it was their summary justice that ensured a harvest of beachrat bodies for the corpse-fishers, themselves always beachrats, to pull out of the marsh every morning.

No job *again*. I had to fight down panic. Each time it happened it got harder, as the population grew and the resources of the country shrank. How would we eat? How would we pay the rent for our one lousy, mildewed room on Walton Street? How would we stop little Maria from getting seriously ill with her asthma and coughs and wheezes?

But more than anything else, the question I asked myself was: *how will I face Suzanne?*

She had changed so much. There had been a time when her first unthinking reaction when she saw me was to break into a smile. Now, even at the best of times, there was no smile and her first word was usually a complaint or a grievance. She'd once been so convinced that I was someone wonderful that I even believed it myself, but now all she saw was failure and powerlessness and weakness.

*I can't return with no work, I decided. I'd rather just walk away, walk away and never see her or Maria ever again.*

And for a moment there, Dr Brennan, I really did think about it. It would have hurt them both if I'd left. In fact it would quite



possibly have *killed* Maria, for how could Suzanne pay the rent and buy the food and provide care for a sickly child all at the same time? But if I walked away, at least I would be spared the shame and misery of witnessing all that. The world being as it was, I could lose myself easily, put myself beyond the reach of Suzanne and everyone that we knew, and simply start again without that burden. I was a non-person, Suzanne and Maria were non-people. In a strange way, that's what we were *even to one another*. It wouldn't be so long – or so it seemed to me in that brief moment – it wouldn't be so long before they had no more substance in my mind than some old dream.

“Hey! Juan!”

I turned round. It was Thach Pham, the Magdalen physicist, running after me, dodging passers-by.

“Juan! Juan, I’m... I’m so sorry,” he gasped as he tried to catch his breath. “Das has just told me he’s let you go. I did everything I could!”

“Das said you did nothing at all. Like you did nothing at all about that technician job.”

“Well, I... It’s difficult, Juan. You don’t understand. I *would* have spoken up but these days even a second-generation migrant like me has to watch his step.”

“Why did you say you *would* do something then?”

He was in quite a state. Sweat was running down his plump face. “I’m sorry. I thought I... I just thought that...”

“You wanted my approval. You tried to get it by lying. You’re pathetic.”

“Listen Juan. I can get you some work. It’s a bit dangerous and it’s illegal but I could get you five thousand for a day’s work, plus a Republic of Greenland visa for you and your wife and your kid.”

Suzanne and I had never married – as beachrats we couldn’t marry, since we had no legal existence – but I let that pass.

“Please Thach. Don’t make even *more* of a fool of yourself. Why should I believe this ridiculous story when you didn’t do *either* of the things you said you’d do for me before?”

“Because this time it’s true. Please, Juan, let me buy you a drink and I’ll tell you about it. You look as though you could do with one. Listen to me while you drink, and if you’re not interested, that’s fine, you can walk away. What will you have lost?”

He led the way to a nearby pub, a place of the kind where the more prosperous Old Brits went to drink, with a proper licence and prices inflated to some ten times the black market rate by Provisional Government taxes.

“We have something in common,” Pham said as he brought me my beer. “I am a Vietnamese, you are a Spaniard, but there is no longer a country called Vietnam or Spain.”

No, I thought, but he had British nationality and a house of his own. I was a beachrat living in a damp bedsit in Walton Street. The parallels were not *that* striking.

“As to this country,” Pham said, “where is it going? Apparently the population is three times its level fifty years ago, and Old Brits are outnumbered nearly two to one. But...”

“I hate Old Brits,” I said. “Their red faces, their cold angry eyes. Why should they run everything? Why do they think they’re so much better than everyone else?”

Pham shrugged.

“The Old Brits are like little children on a sandy beach. The tide’s coming in and they’re trying to protect their little sandcastle with its paper flag. They will fail soon enough, they will go under, we all will, so why get angry with them?”

I shrugged.

“All the Brits with money,” Pham said, “are moving to places like Greenland and Svalbard and the Antarctic Peninsular...”

“As will you I presume?”

He looked embarrassed but didn’t answer. Obviously he had some bolthole lined up for when the sandbags and ditches were no longer enough to keep the marsh out of his precious college. Why did he try and make these claims to be like me when he so obviously wasn’t?

“Some people,” he said, “are looking at the possibility of leaving the planet altogether.”

“Yeah. I’ve heard.” Then I looked at him in surprise. “Surely that’s not what you...?”

“Oh good God no, no, not me.” Again he blushed. “Leaving the planet is fraught with difficulties, of course,” he said. “You only have to think of the size of rocket and the quantity of fuel that’s required to take even just three or four people into space.”

“This is very interesting,” I said, downing the remainder of my beer, “but I really don’t have the time to...”

Dr Pham clasped my arm. “Just a moment, please Juan. I’m getting to the point. As I say, it simply isn’t practical to transport more than small handfuls of people up from Earth into space. But as you know there is a theoretical possibility of using matter replication to send *copies* of human beings to remote locations at the speed of light.”

“I need to look for a job. You may have time to chat about matter replication, but I don’t. Thanks for the beer.”

“Wait!” This time he grabbed my arm so tightly that it actually hurt. “Listen, I want to help you. We immigrants have got to stick together.”

I angrily shook his hand off me. “Well what are you suggesting? You’re not asking me to go into *space*?”

Pham laughed. “No one gets a ride into space who isn’t a billionaire, Juan. But listen...” Here he looked quickly around to make sure no one else was near enough to hear. “Listen, I’ve been involved in a little work on the side, a little project on behalf of some rather wealthy backers. It’s all a bit hush-hush but they need volunteers who will let themselves be put through a resonance scanner so as to make a copy which can be transmitted to an orbital laboratory my backers have acquired. An old Chinese space station actually, but the Chinese haven’t got much use for it any more, not since...”

He gave a gloomy little shrug to represent flood, famine and civil breakdown.

“You’re given a muscle relaxant to temporarily paralyse you,” he said, “you’re given intravenous oxygen, you’re scanned for maybe forty-five minutes. It’s not pleasant and there is a small but certainly not insignificant chance of death. I consider you a friend Juan and I feel I have to be honest with you about this. There’s something like a one in three hundred chance of death, which of course is terribly high in one way, yet in another way is really quite low odds. In most cases there’s no harm to the donor at all.”

He glanced at me to see my reaction, perhaps fearful that I’d



be angry with him for suggesting that I risk my life. But I just shrugged, so he carried on:

"If all goes well with the transfer, which currently happens about half the time, a viable copy is received by the orbital station, which can then be used for research purposes. You will receive your payment though, of course, whether or not the copy is viable."

He grimaced.

"I say viable but even when the copies seem viable at first they never last longer than a week or two. It's the same when we've tried it with animals. And of course my backers want that sorted out, because what they want to achieve is perfect avatars of themselves and their loved ones that can wander through the stars when this poor old Earth has finally frazzled up completely."

"One in three hundred?" I asked.

I wasn't interested in the science. I didn't care what they wanted to do with the copies. What concern was that of mine?

"Yes. I'm afraid there's a risk associated with high doses of muscle relaxants and anaesthetics."

"Why am I even listening to this? This isn't real. If these backers of yours have all this money, why don't they advertise properly for volunteers? Why pick me?"

"They never advertise because of the legal situation. You might think that the government lets anything go, but it's much more complicated than that. They let some things go, but others they're very fussy about. You can rape and kill some little beach-rat waif and tip her into the Marsh and no one wants to know. But if you make copies of human beings for research purposes, that's a major ethical issue and if the wrong people get to hear about it, the state will be obliged to stamp it out. It makes no sense, I agree, but I suppose it's their way of feeling in control."

Again I shrugged.

"They are prepared to turn a blind eye," Pham said, once again glancing nervously around. "If we're very discreet and if we use only beach..." He broke off. "If we use only illegal immigrants like yourself who are legal non-persons anyway, they're prepared to turn a blind eye. But still the project isn't legal, and I could lose my job if there was a crackdown, lose my job and all the privileges that go with it. I'm taking a risk telling you, but we've been friends haven't we? You and I have been friends?"

Well, if he wanted to think that, I wasn't going to argue.

There'd been some sort of shoot-out on St Giles. A big RAF airship had descended into the middle of the square and soldiers with loudhailers were keeping people back while the bodies were scooped up. We were told later by the BBC that it had been a fight between two beachrat gangs and that the army had stepped in to break it up. But it's quite possible that the gangfight story was just a pretext for one of the army's occasional bloody culls of the beachrat population in general. I saw more than twenty dead for sure (though the BBC would refer vaguely to two or three casualties). The Old Brits were very brutal, but I suppose we weren't much different back in Spain in times gone by when the Africans coming over the Straits stopped being a trickle and became a torrent. We shot them too, for all the good it did us. They kept on coming anyway, and the Sahara followed close behind them.

I hurried back to Walton Street.

"Suzanne! Suzanne!" I called out as I flung open the door of our first floor room, revealing the black mould, the peeling wallpaper, the single-ring cooker in the corner, the bed that filled half the space, the stained toilet in its tiny cupboard, the tangled undergrowth outside the window that led down to an old canal (now simply a somewhat deeper than usual channel running along the edge of the great Thames Marsh that stretched all the way to what was left of London).

"Suzanne! Something amazing has happened!"

I realised that I'd got into the habit of cringing in her presence. Even now, when I had good news for her, I was cringing as if I expected a blow. Annoyed with myself, I straightened up. After all I didn't even need to tell Suzanne about losing the job at Magdalen College. That didn't matter any more.

"Something amazing Suzanne!"

She had been pacing the room with Maria on her hip: petite Suzanne with her fine bones. She used to be so feminine, so gentle, so giving, until she let her hair hang lank and greasy and her face finally set itself into a rigid mask of anger and disappointment and contempt. "Shhhhhh, you thoughtless idiot, Maria is almost asleep. Have you been drinking? What are you doing here at this time of day? I hope you haven't lost your -"

"Suzanne, I've been offered five thousand Euros for one day's work. Five thousand. Plus Greenland resident visas for all three of us."

"Are you mad, or just drunk? Yes, you are drunk aren't you? I can smell the alcohol on your breath. How can you even think of drinking when we're..."

There was a slowly pulsing engine noise above us as the armed airship passed overhead on its way from St Giles to the low hills on the far side of the Marsh. It was carrying away the corpses for cremation.

"Five thousand Euros, Suzanne," I bellowed over the throbbing of the blades. "Five thousand. Look here is a five hundred advance already!"

I held a wad of fifties in front of her that Pham had put into my hands as a token that he really meant what he said.

Looking back, Dr Brennan, it's horrible to remember the low, desperate gleam that came into Suzanne's eyes. In a single instant, here was the evidence of how much poverty and fear and hopelessness had coarsened and corrupted her. But I was coarsened and corrupted too. I was just relieved that she wasn't angry with me, relieved that she wasn't going to hit me and scream at me as she sometimes did - me with my head lowered, my cheek bleeding, holding her at arm's length until the rage passed and the hopeless tears began to flow - relieved that I wouldn't have to tell her that I'd lost my job.

She hurried to lay Maria down on the bed so that she could snatch the money from me. "What did you have to do to earn this?" she asked as she flicked through it with urgent fingers.

I told her about the matter replication experiments and how I would have to be temporarily paralysed and scanned for forty-five minutes.

"...which won't be easy of course," I said, "going under the anaesthetic, and knowing that I could quite possibly never wake again."



As I'd approached the house I'd allowed myself a little fantasy that Suzanne would balk a little at the risk to my life. Pathetic I know, but I'd imagined her saying this:

"I need money for Maria, Juan, but not at the price of losing you."

And then, realising that even as a plausible fantasy this was too much to ask, I'd revised my daydream somewhat.

"Dear Juan," I'd imagined her saying to me. "I've been so hard on you, and yet you're prepared to risk your life for me and our child. How lucky I am to have you!"

The heroism and selflessness of it all had almost brought tears to my eyes, and I'd quite forgotten that, not much more than an hour previously, I'd contemplated abandoning them both.

"So when do you get the rest of the money?" was what Suzanne actually said.

"When I turn up for the scan. You can come with me. You can take the money in advance. And then, even if I..."

"And Greenland visas too?"

"Yes, in advance as well"

"Oh God, oh God, oh God, please let this be real. Please don't let this be some kind of hoax."

"I don't see how it can be. If they don't give us the money, we just walk."

"Well I'll definitely come there with you, because..."

"Thanks, I'd be glad of the..."

"...because you're much too willing to think the best of people. I need to be sure for myself that there's not some kind of con going on."

Suzanne was cleverer than me. That was one of the things that had gradually become apparent to both of us in the time after those early days of daily lovemaking and meals eaten together off a single plate. She was cleverer and more strong-willed.

"Well, yes, of course," I said humbly.

I felt very hurt now, and Suzanne finally sensed it. With a huge effort she turned her thoughts reluctantly away from her fears and her unbearable hopes, and noticed me.

She gave a strained smile. "Hey Juan. Well done. This could be it couldn't it? This could be when our luck turns?"

I brightened at once. "That's right. Didn't I always say something would come up?"

I stepped forward to embrace her. Just for a moment she allowed herself to melt in my arms in the way that she'd done in the early days. But then little Maria began to cry and Suzanne tensed and pulled away from me.

So on a warm foggy morning five days later Suzanne and Maria and I met Pham by Town Docks where the wide shallow-draft barges stopped off on their way up and down Thames Marsh between Oxford and half-drowned London. He had a little steam launch waiting for us there and we set off through the mist, flooded buildings and dead trees looming out of the whiteness around us and disappearing back into it again. Pham paced restlessly all the time, sometimes bothering the taciturn skipper with anxious talk, sometimes peering anxiously into the white obscurity ahead of us.

Four or five kilometres west of the city we came to an old private hospital that sat on a hill above the Marsh. We docked at a makeshift jetty there and Pham put the rest of the money I

was owed into Suzanne's hands, along with letters on the headed paper of the Republic of Greenland, confirming our right to enter as alien residents. (I'm still puzzled by that. What kind of authority did Pham's friends have to be able to arrange *that* for us in a single day? I hope to God those letters were real.)

Anyway, then I said goodbye to Suzanne. It felt like goodbye too, even though, all being well, it would only be for less than an hour. There, in the cold chemical atmosphere of the hospital, with that sharp sterile antiseptic smell that makes you think of shiny blades and mortuary slabs and neatly amputated limbs, she finally felt afraid for me, and cried. And then of course little Maria cried too, my little Maria, stretching out her little hands to me to try and hold me back, and bawling her head off. All of this was a great comfort to me, buoying me up and making me feel for a short time like that noble knight that Suzanne had once seen in me. An Indian doctor came and took me into the scanner room. Pham, who'd been shifting about restlessly in the background all the while, went off somewhere to attend to the data transfer process that would transmit the configuration of every single particle that made up my body up to that old Chinese space station above the equator.

The scanning machine was huge – it filled up most of a room that was five or six times the size of our entire bedsit in Walton Street – and it gave off a loud hum. I had to strip naked, be covered in clear jelly and then laid down on a hard plastic bed where I was given the injections that would make me unconscious and keep me still while the machine did its work.

As I sank under, I tried to avoid thinking about that one in three hundred possibility that I would never wake again, and instead concentrate on the fact that the overwhelmingly more likely outcome would be that I would be walking out of this place in an hour's time with all that we needed to start a new life for ourselves in the temperate north.

Greenland, Greenland, Greenland, I repeated to myself, and my last thoughts were of an emerald city, shining under cloudless sky.

I woke, feeling dizzy and nauseous, in a small, rather dirty room smelling of metal and oil and human sweat. I was naked, as I had been when I went under, but now I was covered all over in tubes and electrodes. And across the room two men in blue overalls were conferring in front of a large monitor.

"I made it!" I yelled triumphantly. "Greenland here I come! Did you guys get your copy alright?"

One of the men glanced round at me – a thin South Asian man with a small pointed beard – but oddly he didn't answer or smile or even make eye contact.

"Conscious!" he said to his companion, who was stocky and black. "That makes a change."

The black man laughed. "I made it!" he mimicked, caricaturing my Spanish accent. "Greenland here I come! Wish I had a dollar every time they said that."

I tried to sit up, found that I was strapped down onto the bed with strong canvas belts. "Hey what's going on? You said I could get up and walk as soon as I got through the scan."

The first man, the Asian, stood up and came over, casting his eye coolly over my body. "Looks pretty good," he said. "Looks pretty functional to me."



"What about an answer to my question?" I demanded. "What kind of hospital are you running here?"

The first man grinned across at his companion. "What kind of hospital, Toussaint? What kind of hospital would you say this was?"

They both laughed.

"Is there some problem?" I said. "Have I suffered some damage of some kind?"

They both laughed at this, but completely ignored my question. The Asian man picked up a phone. "Dr Brennan? 8856 has come out well. Everything working fine. Heart, lungs, metabolism, talking, emotional agitation, everything. Best one all day."

I strained to hear the voice on the other end of the line – your voice of course, as it turns out – but I was prevented by a crackly p.a. announcement which seemed to come from a corridor outside. "*Docking in five minutes. I repeat, docking in five minutes. Primary crew to docking stations. I repeat, primary crew to docking stations. Over.*"

"Let's hope there's a bit more liquor on board this time," the black man said. "Last time it all went in a day."

"It was a trick wasn't it?" I said. "I'm not going to Greenland am I? I'm not going to get to keep that five thousand dollars?"

Can you believe I still had no inkling of my circumstances? I knew *something* was wrong but I didn't have the slightest idea of what that something was. I suppose if you wake up and remember that you're a man called Juan Fernandez then that's who you are. It's not a conviction that can easily be dislodged.

The black man giggled a little uncomfortably and looked at his friend.

"Why won't you speak to me?" I strained at the straps which held me down. "Why are you behaving like I'm not here?"

Were we on a boat of some kind, I wondered? It did look like a boat with its walls made of bolted metal plates. Had this all been an elaborate kidnapping? Had I been sneaked out of the back door of that hospital on the hill, while Suzanne and Maria waited for me out front? Had I been loaded onto some barge?

But why would they pay out five thousand Euros for that? They could have easily, and much more cheaply, just snatched someone from the street. No one would worry about a missing beachrat. Beachrats were there for the taking. So why bother with the money and the Greenland visas?

"Please," I pleaded with them, "I don't know what's happening and I don't know why you don't want to speak to me, but can't you just tell me where I am and how I got here?"

For some reason both men had bent over their console of instruments while I was speaking.

"Perfect," the Asian man exclaimed. "We haven't had one this good for weeks."

"What's perfect?" I cried. "How can it hurt to talk to me? Where am I? Where are my wife and daughter?"

Again they had stooped over their console while I was speaking. (You've kindly explained to me since that they were watching my brain waves.) Now they both made little noises of pleasure and satisfaction.

"Even better than last time," the black man said. "I mean look at –"

He was interrupted by a metallic clunking sound that seemed to originate somewhere far away in the building, or boat, or

whatever it was – I still hadn't got it, I still had no idea what my real situation was – and the whole structure shook. Both men looked up towards the door, not because there was anything to see, but because they knew the sound was coming from that direction.

"They're supposed to dock with the station," grumbled the black man, "not fucking ram it."

"What's happened? Where am I?" I wailed.

So finally the black man, Toussaint, turned on me. "Shut the fuck up, 8856, do you hear me? You're a copy. You're not a person. You haven't got a wife and kids. You don't even have a mind."

"Hey now, Toussaint," the Asian man scolded. "Don't talk to it. You know that's not a good idea."

"I know, Abdul, but it was starting to get on my nerves."

"What do you mean I haven't got a mind? I'm Juan Fernandez! I can talk! I can think! I'm a human being."

And the black man, Toussaint, spoke very softly and through gritted teeth, without looking at me, without even really addressing me, as a man might mutter at a recalcitrant computer, or swear at a car that won't start. "You're not a human being. You're a copy of a human being."

I remembered a conversation I'd had with Suzanne the night before we went down to Town Dock.

I was uncorking the bottle of Scottish wine that we'd recklessly bought to celebrate our imminent escape. Suzanne – she was once a physicist remember – was wondering aloud about that persistent problem with the replicator that Pham had mentioned to me. Why did the copies never manage to survive for more than a few weeks?

"I've no idea," I said. "I didn't ask him anything about it. The money and the Greenland visas, those were the important things as far as I was concerned. Who cares about their research?"

"I don't," said Suzanne. "Not really. But I expect your copy will."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, they don't just copy the body do they? They copy the brain and the thoughts and everything. So if the copy is viable, even for a short time, it will have thoughts and feelings, won't it? And I guess it will have quite strong feelings about being trapped in a space station and used for research, don't you think? You should know better than me though, Juan, because it's you they will make a copy of. It'll feel whatever you'd feel."

This shook me a little.

"Would it really have my memories and my feelings and everything?" I asked after a pause.

"Well yes. That's the whole idea isn't it? So people can project themselves out across space."

"I suppose. I wonder how that feels, not being a real person at all but having someone else's memories?"

"I suppose they don't feel like someone else's memories. After all, they're the only memories it has."

"So that would mean... That would mean it would think it was me, wouldn't it? When it wakes up on that satellite it will think it is me, waking up in hospital after the anaesthetic, and then it'll find out that..."

I broke off.

"I wonder what they'll do with it?" I said.

Suzanne shrugged. "Test its reactions, its nerves, its biochem-



istry? Cut it up? See if its organs are working properly? I've really no idea."

"Will it be able to feel pain and fear do you think?"

"Why not? Assuming that it's one of their successful attempts, it'll be alive. It will have a body. It will have a brain."

"Madre de Dios, what have I done? It will be like me. It will feel the same feelings, and I have sent it up there to let it be cut in pieces. I shouldn't have done this, should I?"

"What? And not get out of lousy England? Miss a chance of a new life for Maria in a country where there is still grass and cool air and space? You must be joking."

"Yes but..."

"Oh for goodness sake, Juan, bad things happen all the time. Real people are tortured every day, real people are killed. All over the world real people in their thousands starve and drown and die of thirst. What concern is it of ours what happens to one stupid copy on some old satellite in space? It's not as if we'll have to see the thing. It's not as if we'll ever know what happened to it. It might as well be in a different universe altogether, for all it concerns us."

I thought for maybe three seconds, then laughed. "You're right. Who cares? What business is it of ours?" And with that I raised my glass and proposed a toast to the three of us and our future. "To Greenland! To Greenland and a new life."

As I drained my wine I glanced across the room. Then I turned and winked at Suzanne. "Look darling, Maria's fast asleep! Shall we really celebrate?"

And that was the first and last time, before I went into the scanner, that I thought, even for a moment about what the copy would experience.

I lay there for a long time, taking in what Toussaint, in his irritation, had told me.

"So you didn't trick the real Juan Fernandez?" I finally said. "He really did get the five thousand Euros and the visas. He really is on his way to Greenland?"

Your two delightful technicians ignored me as they always did.

I had grasped my situation intellectually now, but emotionally I was light years away from getting hold of it. I had no other identity but that of Juan Fernandez, no other memories but Juan's, no other perspective but Juan's way of seeing the world. It was simply not psychologically possible to think of myself as being anyone other than Juan, even though Juan was actually a man who cared nothing for me, for he had dismissed any responsibility for my well-being after only a few moments of thought.

"So this body here, this body never existed on Earth?"

Toussaint picked up the phone. "What's keeping you guys?" he complained. "When are you going to take 8856 off our hands? We finished all the routine stuff half an hour ago and it's driving us nuts with its babbling. Plus Abdul and I want to get our hands on some of that liquor before it all goes."

Your voice in the earpiece said something. Toussaint's irritable tone softened. "Straight to your office Dr Brennan? Okay, we'll bring it right down. Thanks very much."

"Physical testing?" I cried. "Please tell me, what on earth is that?"

"Please tell me, what on earth is that?" Toussaint mimicked

me in a cartoon Spanish accent, as he and Abdul wheeled my bed to the door.

The corridor was narrow and curved up visibly at both ends as it encircled the revolving space station. There was a smell of perished rubber and cabbage and urine. They wheeled me past a forlorn, grubby little cafeteria where four or five other technicians in blue overalls sat drinking.

"Hey, Toussaint. Whisky! Going to come and join us?" one of them called out.

"Soon as we've dumped off this thing."

On the wall of the cafeteria was a wide flat screen showing the image of the planet Earth beneath us. Unusually there was very little cloud and almost the entire Atlantic was laid out as clearly as if this was a geographer's globe. Red desert extended over all but the northern fringes of what land was visible. Greenland, though, was green.

I imagined the real Juan, with Suzanne and Maria, slowly crossing the wide sea towards it. It struck me that if only the resolution of the screen were high enough, I would be able to see their ship.

I ached inside as I thought about Suzanne and my little girl who I would never, ever see again, far, far away from me.

The real Juan, on the other hand, I could happily have killed.

*How could he have put me out of his mind so quickly and easily? I wondered. A glass of wine, a promise of sex, that was all it took to stop him thinking about me. Yet I'm not a stranger, I'm not someone whose needs are so different from his that he'd find them hard to understand. I'm like him in every single way.*

But then we reached your office, Dr Brennan, and a beautiful friendship began.

Look at you in your crumpled jacket and your Heinrich Himmler glasses and your face wracked with longing and self-hatred and principles: the compassionate sadist, the doctor whose ethics forbid him to follow the Hippocratic oath, the loner hiding away in a metal box in space, waiting for defective copies of human beings to be delivered up to his scalpels and his needles and his kind solicitous voice.

"I must apologise for my technicians," you said. "They have a superstitious idea that copies don't have souls. It helps them to live with what they're doing, though of course it makes no logical sense since the whole enterprise is based on the premise that a copy is or could be fully human."

Then you shook your head sadly.

"Of course I know that you have feelings every bit as much as I do. And that..." Your voice cracked slightly and for moment you seemed on the verge of tears. "And that makes it all very hard for me. Very hard. You've no idea. But be assured of my sympathy at all times, and be assured that I will reduce to a minimum any pain that I have to inflict."

After which you tortured me for some time – yes Dr Brennan, *tortured*: that is the correct word – with electric shocks and cuts inflicted without anaesthetic. Your face gleamed with sweat, contorted by excitement and shame. You kept apologising – "I'm so sorry. I hate this. I only wish there was another way!" – but you wouldn't stop and I was powerless to stop you. It was unendurable yet inescapable. I will never forgive you for it, though as I'm going to be dead very soon, I guess you needn't worry too



much about that.

"There," you said at last. "That's the worst part over."

You were pale and trembling, your gloved hands slimy with my blood.

"Ghastly for both of us, but it's done," you said. "I always feel it's best to get that out of the way at the outset. For all the other procedures, normal anaesthetics can be used. Please accept my apologies for what I've just inflicted on you. I'm afraid it is necessary because an abnormal pain response is one of the characteristics of defective copies, and we absolutely have to try and –"

Suddenly you rushed out. Was it to be sick? Or to masturbate? Or to visit one of your other mutilated copies in some other grubby little cell? Or was it just to mop your face and gulp down the spirits that I smelled on your breath when you returned? Another technician – a white man this time, I think perhaps a Russian or a Pole – came in and wiped the blood off me with a cloth. He wouldn't meet my eyes or answer my questions.

Then you were back, gently explaining to me how you were going to have to remove parts of me for tests: my intestines, my pancreas, an arm, a foot...

"I assure you, Juan, I'm a good doctor and will do everything in my power to keep you painless and comfortable throughout the time you have left," you said, reaching down and squeezing my hand reassuringly.

I think this is probably the only kind of intimacy you ever get, isn't it? I think the only time in which you're able to feel close to another human being is when you have some wretch like me strapped down in front of you and are about to begin eviscerating them. You really *believe* that you're being respectful and kind, don't you? You really believe you are doing your best by us. I think you even experience an emotion that seems to you to be love.

"How long have you been up here?" I asked.

"I live here all the time," you said. "This is where I'll end my days."

"We're part of the problem," you told me another time.

I'd been shackled by two technicians and made to walk around a bit, then strapped back on the bed where you'd given me some knock-out pills and left me alone for a period of artificial sleep. I've no way of knowing of how long the sleep was for, or whether it corresponded in any way with what we would normally call a night. I had a drip to feed me, a catheter to carry away my wastes.

After I woke you removed my kidney under a local anaesthetic and had a technician carry it off to histology to be sliced up for tests. There was a screen on the wall of the room and, at my request, you'd set it to show the view of the great globe below us.

"We doctors are part of the problem, Juan my friend," you said as you stood beside me contemplating our half-burnt and half-drowned planet. "Medical science is one of the main reasons that things on Earth got so bad. The things that are normally blamed – excessive carbon dioxide, pollution, deforestation – they're really all secondary factors. You could cut down trees and drive cars without doing any harm at all if there were only a few million people on the planet. But when the population gets up to over a billion and a half and then goes on to quadruple itself less than a century later... Well, how can that be viable?

How *can* it? The human race *needed* pestilence. Doctors, in their arrogance, took it away. I came up here to do this work because, in my own small way, I wanted to atone for the harm we doctors had done by dedicating my medical knowledge to the service of the human future. I know it's horrible what I do here. It is wretched for you people and, believe me, it's wretched for me too. It eats away at me. I'm slowly destroying myself. But I keep doing it because I believe it is important for us to find a way of making a new start. I'm sacrificing myself for this cause as much as I'm sacrificing you."

You glanced down at me, hoping for a response. *Nombre de Dios!* I thought Pham was bad enough with his preposterous attempts at brotherhood, but this was something *else*. What were you expecting from me, Dr Brennan? Pity? Did you want this doomed copy of a human being, tortured and mutilated by you, to tell you that you'd done the right thing?

Well I said nothing, and you sighed, and you carefully explained to me about the next stage in my dismantling, to begin in twenty-four hours after another chemically induced rest. It was almost as if you were a proper doctor and were trying to make me better.

I suppose it can't be long now until I'm just matter again, like I was until only a few days ago, when a soup of unconnected particles was temporarily gathered together by a resonance field and moulded into a replica of a human being called Juan Fernandez. I'll soon just be soup again won't I? This body will be broken back down into plasma and then you'll set up a new resonance field, and it will pull those particles back together again, this time in the shape of someone else. Some stranger who I'll never know will be formed out of this very same stuff that now forms me.

I'm not really Juan Fernandez, I know that. I'm not really anyone at all. But I still think about Suzanne and Maria and the real Juan on their boat, crossing the wide ocean to Greenland. I can't help wondering if Suzanne is grateful to Juan for what he's done, and whether she wriggles up warm and soft against him in their little berth with the cold sea forgotten outside, and whether she melts and moans and sighs like she once used to? And if so, I wonder, does it ever occur to either of them to think of this doomed prisoner up here, this eviscerated amputee, who *really* paid the price? (For what price did *he* pay? What did he have to give up?)

Well I doubt it. It's not that they're heartless monsters, really. It's just that people don't worry all that much about consequences that they don't have to see, or care that much about other people that they've never had to meet. It's just the way that human beings are.

Unless of course they're like you, Dr Brennan, with your noble dreams of reaching out across the stars and saving the human race.

Actually I preferred the flower meadows of Greenland as a goal to aim for: flower meadows and mountain streams and cool summer breezes.

Maria will like all that, I think to myself. And even now it makes me smile. Maria will just love all that.

I would never really have left them. I would never really have walked away. ♡



CHRIS BECKETT

# RAT ISLAND

"Technically this is a prequel to my story 'Piccadilly Circus' which appeared in *Interzone* a few years ago. In that story the elderly Clarissa Fall remembers visiting Piccadilly Circus as a child. That was the starting point for this story, though 'Rat Island' has ended up with a rather different feel: more naturalistic, less fantastical.

(Incidentally, 'Piccadilly Circus' was itself a sequel to a story called 'The Perimeter' that appeared in *Asimov's SF*.) Most of my stories include some autobiographical elements mixed in with the fiction (though I don't always feel like saying exactly what they are!).

There are several autobiographical things in here, one of which was that my grandfather was a senior civil servant. Curiously enough, my main model for the elderly Clarissa in 'Piccadilly Circus' was his wife, my grandmother. I like the way that this story is set a bit in the future, as seen from sometime further in the future, but you don't find out anything about what that further future is actually like. I think that is neat."

illustrated by  
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Snap. I took this picture when I was eleven. This tall man is my dad, his face in a kind of frozen wince, wishing he was back in his Whitehall office on his own, going through a draft report with his gold fountain pen. This pretty little girl is my sister, Clarrie, in her new red coat and fluffy earmuffs. She looks a bit blurred because she is doing a pirouette. She has just pushed my father's arm up into that position, rather as if he was a tailor's dummy and she is pirouetting round and round beneath it, while he thinks about something else. She would have been seven.

We're in Piccadilly Circus, on the steps at the foot of the statue of Eros. Behind us are the famous lights. They were quite wonderful: reckless waves of brilliant red and green and blue and white sweeping across vast arrays of electric bulbs, giant logos of global corporations summoned into brilliant existence – Coca-Cola, TDK, Sanyo, Cinzano – more vivid and numinous and beautiful, surely, than any religious icon in history.

Incredible folly, blind recklessness, it all now seems – blazing electric light for no purpose at all except advertising and decoration – but it was a golden age, one of the pinnacles of history. We lived in a great global empire of light and plenty, fuelled by the ancient energy of ancient suns stored up over millions of years and burned up by us in one great glorious hundred-year binge.

"Round and round the garden," sang out my sister for the tenth time, putting on even more of a baby voice, and turning up the volume to *very loud*. She glanced at my dad with a mixture of defiance and longing and contempt.

She was being silly. She was being annoying. She was doing it on purpose. And look at Dad's face, strained with the agony of being kept from his world of abstract thought. If there was a deeper despair there than I'd noticed on previous visits I couldn't see it then and, to be truthful, I still can't see it now, even looking at the pictures with all my knowledge of what was to follow in a couple of months' time.

"You're being a bit annoying Clarrie," I muttered.

From this long perspective I see something heroic in Clarrie's refusal to give up on the possibility of getting our father's attention, or on the possibility that there might be fun here to be had. There *was* something heroic about my sister. There was then and there continued to be until the day she died. No matter what, she insisted on her right to her own space in the world. She insisted on her right to be noticed and heard.

But I couldn't see it so clearly then. Then I couldn't bear it if anyone was not as attentive to my father's moods and responses as I was. The slightest smile from him and I would redouble my efforts at whatever it was I was doing to win his favour. The slightest frown, the slightest hint of boredom, and I would either end what I was doing at once or, if politeness required me to finish what I was saying, I would double the speed of my delivery so as to waste the absolute minimum of his precious time, gabbling to get the words out in a desperate dash to finish before I'd lost his attention altogether.

"I'm not being annoying," Clarrie said. "*You are. You are. You are.*"

Snap. Dad winced.

We only saw our father four times a year. We lived in Yorkshire at that time, in a little bohemian town with my beautiful artistic mother and a steady succession of her lovers. Dad was a mandarin, a senior civil servant. They'd split up soon after Clarrie's

birth. At the time I took this photo Dad was assistant Permanent Secretary in the Department of Strategic Planning. He lived on his own in a bachelor flat in Kensington, and we came down by train to spend the weekend with him a few times a year. We and he were almost complete strangers to one another.

"Round and round the garden," yelled Clarrie, yanking at Dad's hand to try and get him to join in, to respond, to do at least *something* to register that he was alive and that he had noticed that she was there. I think she would have been glad even if he had lost his temper with her. Even that would have been preferable to this bland indifference, letting her use his clean dry mandarin's hand as a fulcrum for her frantic pirouette while he considered the faraway important things that only mandarins understand.

"Round and round the garden, Dad," she yelled.

"Round and round the garden?" said Dad at length, stirring himself from his state of trance. "Round and round the garden eh Clarrie? Time I got you two back in the warm, I'd say. It's a bit chilly now for round and round the garden here, wouldn't you say? A bit chilly for little girls."

He released her hand. We crossed the road. We headed for the underground station.

Snap, snap. Here is the big Sanyo sign. Here is the statue of Eros: the god of love. Those things there are buses and cars. They ran on tanks full of hydrocarbons extracted from the earth. Imagine that: each one of them, burning litres and litres of the stuff every day! It came in great ships from across the sea. The ships burned hydrocarbons too. And look at all the lights. There are white lights on the front of the cars, red lights on the back of them, orange lights that flashed to say if they are turning right or left, lights at street corners to tell them when to stop and when to go...

Hydrocarbons were burnt in power stations up and down the land to keep those lights shining: millions of years-worth of carboniferous forest going up in one glorious momentary smoky blaze.

Clarrie pushed between my father and me, made each of us take one of her hands and tried to encourage us to give her a swing. And then, encountering indifference from both of us, she abruptly shook herself free with a cross little toss of her head and rushed forward instead to the gateway of the underground station with its shining icon: red, white, blue.

"I want to go first on the sclator!" she cried, glaring back at me. "You are *not* to hold my hand, Tom!"

Snap, snap. These are just some strangers, some passers-by who I photographed when they weren't looking. You see they are wearing hemispherical goggles over their eyes. Those things were called *bug eyes*. They were all the rage back then. They were the next big thing after mobile telephones and hand-held computers. People wearing them could have their own personalised visual field imposed over their view of the world around them. They could have the colours enhanced or switched round. They could have purple trees and yellow sky. They could have black light and white darkness. They could have pop videos or pornography or sport or celebrities moving in shadow form over the physical world. They could buy and sell things over the internet as they walked. They could see the faces of friends and talk to them.

The clever goggles could sense the movement of your facial muscles and construct a picture of your face without a camera.



All around us people were prattling away to unseen people that only they could see. You could show yourself to whoever you chose, not your actual self but yourself how you wanted to be seen. We were already letting go of the physical world. Without even knowing it, we were already letting go.

"Careful on the steps, Clarrie," I commanded as we descended to the yellow cave below the ground. We'd always looked out for each other, the two of us. Mum wasn't at all like Dad in most ways but she was just as self-absorbed.

Look at this pair. Another two strangers I snapped before we disappeared under the earth. They're young lovers, lovers together in the very presence of the god of love, but they both have their bug eyes on and are gabbling away not to each other but to friends who are not physically there at all but perhaps on the far side of the city or even on the far side of the world. Rockets fuelled with hydrocarbons blasted satellites into space to carry our chitter-chatter back and forth. Giant transmitters powered by electricity beamed out our chitter-chatter to the silent stars. We loved our toys back then, our bright lights, our screens, our shining trains rushing out of black tunnels into caves full of images of the bright and shining things that we could buy.

"Hmm," said my father, *sotto voce*, for my ears only, as we descended into the hollow spaces below Piccadilly Circus. "Might be the last time you see all this I fear," and he gave a gesture that took in the lights and the cars and the buses and the crowds.

I looked up at him to ask what on earth he meant, and he gave a little significant nod towards my sister to say 'not in front of her', as though the four years between my age and hers somehow made me old enough to deal with anything.

Snap, snap. Here we are in the train, look. Everyone has their bug eyes on but us, everyone but us and that weirdo in the corner who is mad and can escape to his own private world without the benefit of technology. Nobody else really sees him. People turn the opacity of their goggles up to the max now they are sitting down. The outside world is all but shut out completely for them. Wireless routers in the train ensure that even entombed down here in the cold London clay, the passengers are not forced to relinquish their grip on their comforting streams of pictures and words and music and information and faces. Like Jonah in the belly of the whale, they call out from the depths and the digital heavens answer them. Incessantly, like the love of God, data pours down.

Snap. There were moving advertisements in trains then, pictures shifting restlessly above each window, going through their ten- or twenty-second cycles. Over the window opposite me, above my own reflected face superimposed on sooty tunnel walls, one of these moving pictures was showing a hurricane sweeping through some Caribbean town. I did a little video clip of it, look. The palm-trees bend down, lay their coconuts neatly on the ground in rows, bend back up again... A slogan comes up: 'What are *you* doing to cut your carbon emissions?'

Was that what my father meant, I wondered? Were we going to have to turn off the lights in Piccadilly Circus maybe, or turn them down so they weren't so bright? Was that what he was talking about? I knew there was a problem and we were going to have to do *something*. Everyone knew that. Everyone knew that we all had to do our bit. My mother was very into all that. She

made us recycle just about everything. She had low-energy light bulbs in every room. She planted a tree in the garden each time she flew off across the world with her latest fancy man. I can tell you, we had quite a forest going on out there, though many of the trees had died due to the drying out of their roots.

Snap. Here's Clarrie again. Look, she's insisted on sitting apart from my father and me, on her own, in a different part of the carriage. She's on the edge of her seat, excited, revering the moment as only Clarrie ever could, taking in the wondrous magical metropolis with all its reckless light and motion. I loved her desperately, that little sister of mine. I loved her more than anyone in the world.

Snap, snap. This is just off the street near my dad's flat: a side alley where people left their rubbish – food scraps, boxes, plastic bags, tons of the stuff, to be scooped up every fortnight into big trucks and taken out of the city to be piled up in the low seagull-infested artificial hills that you found near every town. Look, here are a couple of foxes looking for scraps. Can you make them out? Foxes. This was what foxes were like!

Actually they had red fur, but they look grey and ghostly in the picture because of the streetlights. If you had bug eyes on, even on low opacity, you'd have barely made them out at all. You would probably not even notice they were there. Few people did. It was like that in those days. It was as if the non-human world was slowly leaching away. One day we'd wake up and it would all be gone: the deer and the foxes and the hedgehogs and the pigeons, finally become so nebulous and pale that they'd ceased to exist, unable to compete with our bright TVs and our bug eyes and our shining lights.

My father's flat was as sterile as a hotel room. It was a serviced apartment. Someone from the service company came in to clean it every morning and make his bed, a Russian, a Filipino, a Nigerian... At that time British people worked on computer screens or not at all. They dealt with digitised information brought to them along optical cables or through the ether. Work that involved the physical world was always done by migrants, who were nearly invisible, like those foxes.

He'd pushed the boat out for us this time. It wasn't a supermarket instant meal that night. He'd paid one or other of his cleaners to put something together earlier that day that he could heat up for us in his microwave. It was lasagne, I remember, a rather leathery lasagne. We ate it in virtual silence, sitting round his shiny empty wooden table, with the fake flames dancing about in his fake fire.

Pretty soon afterwards, he put Clarrie to bed, reading her a story from an old book whose archaic language she didn't understand, and whose attempts at humour went completely over her head. (Dad never seemed to notice things like that.) I was allowed to stay up another hour in deference to my advanced age. Dutifully I loaded the dishes into his little dishwasher while he finished reading to Clarrie.

"Where do you put your bottles Dad?" I asked him when he returned.

"What do you mean?"

"For recycling..."

He laughed. "Recycling? Oh Tom, Tom, it's a bit late for that."







I wasn't sure what he meant. "What, you mean they've already picked the glass up for this week?"

"No, no. I mean it's a bit late to try and save the world by recycling bottles... That would be like... That would be like trying to stop the tide with a teaspoon." He laughed a bit more. "A glass of wine Tom?" he then asked me. "I think you're old enough for a glass."

I hated the stuff actually, but I didn't like to reject anything from him, because I saw him so rarely, and because I didn't want him to doubt, even for one moment, my devotion. He poured me dry white wine, and I sat at his table and sipped it manfully. He downed his first glass almost in one and poured himself a second.

"I didn't like to say it in front of Clarrie, Tom," he then said, "but things are looking pretty bleak."

His voice was very tight as if he was stifling anger or tears or illicit excitement. I couldn't tell which.

"What? The lights? They're going to have to turn them off?"

"Turn off the lights? What on earth are you talking about?"

"In Piccadilly Circus. Wasting energy."

He banged his glass angrily down on the table. "Oh for goodness sake, Thomas. Do they teach you *nothing* in that appalling school of yours?"

He might as well have whipped me with razor wire. Tears of shame came stinging into my eyes. I hung my head, self-loathing blasting through me like an icy gale. Yet I had no idea what I had said wrong. I was only eleven years old after all. For something to do I picked up my camera, fiddled with it. Snap, the flash went off. (Look, here is the picture I took by mistake. Here is my right foot and my father's blue serviced-apartment carpet.)

"Oh for goodness sake, boy, stop *fiddling* with that thing!"

I laid the camera down. My father snatched up the wine bottle and poured himself another glass.

"It's not a question of a few lights, Tom, as you should know by now. Equilibrium has disappeared beyond our reach. Four or five major positive feedback loops are now accelerating out of control, each one amplifying the others: arctic methane, water vapour, the loss of ice cover to reflect the sun, dying forests..."

He downed the third glass, again in one, and reached for the bottle.

"A while back a couple of our scientists did a little experiment. A breeding pair of rats was introduced to an obscure rock in the Atlantic which had previously been inhabited by nothing but millions of seabirds. The rats ate eggs and baby birds and they prospered and multiplied. Soon there were hundreds of them. But there were *millions* of birds, so that some time went by without the rats making any appreciable dent in their numbers at all. They just kept on breeding and breeding and breeding, eating birds and eggs to their hearts' content."

He was pouring himself yet another glass.

"But a moment came when the entire system reached a point of no return, a point where collapse was inevitable, because the bird population was no longer capable of reproducing fast enough to replace the eggs and babies eaten by the rats. You might think that some visible sign of the approaching famine would be apparent to the rats, but no. Even when the point of no return had been reached and passed there were more rats than ever before and they still had plenty to eat. In fact if you

were a rat you might think to yourself that you'd never had it so good. You might feel as happy and as cheery and as prosperous as all those silly people milling round Piccadilly Circus with their ridiculous goggles on, shopping and going to shows and talking about Christmas and next year's holiday. 'There are *lots* more nests,' a rat might think, if it were capable of thinking, as it gobbled up the contents of one nest and moved on to the next. 'There are nests all over the place,' it might say to itself. And it would be quite right. It's just that this time round the rats weren't eating a small percentage of the nests, they were eating them all. Once those nests had gone there would be nothing left."

Again he downed his wine in one gulp. Even at eleven years old I knew this was pretty fast drinking.

"Well, that's how it is with us. The critical moment has been and gone. We can recycle bottles and build windmills to our hearts' content, but it's too late. The moment when we could do anything about it passed about ten years ago."

He gave a bark of humourless laughter and said nothing for a while, turning his empty wine glass back and forth in his hand. After a time he poured himself even more wine, offering me a top-up which I declined.

"Can you keep a secret Tom?" he asked.

I nodded, though I dreaded what he would say next.

"This is an *Official Secret*, Tom, do you understand? You mustn't tell anyone, no one at all, not even your mother."

Again I nodded, not because I wanted him to go on – I really didn't – but because I couldn't see what else I could do. It was out of the question to tell him to keep his official secret to himself, though that was what I should have done. I should have told him I didn't want his miserable secret. I should have told him that, if this secret was so terrible as to be hidden from the population at large, it really wasn't fair to confide it to a little boy, and then ask *him* to keep it. But back then I wasn't even able to frame the *idea* of saying such things to him.

"This is just between you and me Tom, as long as you understand that. This must not get out. But the fact is we've got two or three years at most before it all comes apart. The climate science, the really serious climate science, is all classified nowadays – it's just too sensitive to let out – so you won't have heard about it, but I can assure you it's much *much* worse than we thought possible even a few years ago. We underestimated those positive feedback loops, you see. The arctic methane. The water vapour. All of that. All of those loops which instead of damping down change like normal biological negative feedback loops, actually amplify it. Accelerate it. The curve is already much steeper than ever before. Only a year or two's time now, and it will *really* begin to soar – and then..." He gulped more wine. "Well, we have a plan in place, but it won't be pretty. In fact it'll make the Holocaust look like a picnic. I've secured your place in the ark so to speak, yours and Clarrie's and your mother's, but most people...well let's just say that if they don't drown and aren't shot, they'll starve. Ha! Not a pleasant prospect, not a pleasant prospect at all. Are you sure you don't want any more this stuff. *Hmm, we seem to have finished the bottle. Let's open another shall we? Why not? It's not every day I have you down here.*"

.....  
Snap. This is Clarrie, my sweet little sister, fast asleep in her pink pyjamas in the top bunk in Dad's spare room. I took this picture



when I finally went to bed. I suppose I wanted to hold onto something that wasn't tarnished and spoiled. My dad was on his third bottle by then. He had been telling me what a fine man *his* father was, and how he hadn't properly appreciated him until he was gone. The thought had brought tears to his grey mandarin eyes. Finally he had nodded off in his chair.

A couple of months later he went up onto the roof of an office block where he had been attending some corporate gathering. He laid his briefcase carefully down, climbed up onto the parapet, smoothed down his tie – and jumped.

Snap, snap. Snap, snap. This is us on the train back north. Here, look, are the green rolling hills of England like we all remember them. Here is Clarrie pulling a silly face...

Mother's new boyfriend Pete came to meet us from the station in her car. He was ten years younger than her and wore torn dungarees with smears of paint all over them. Mum greeted us in her beautiful rustic kitchen. She kissed Clarrie, she kissed me and then, more lingeringly, more knowingly, she kissed Pete. I needed badly to be alone. I went up to my room. (Here it is look: my room, with my model planes, my Leeds United posters.) I found the noisiest, bloodiest computer game that I owned, and played it at maximum volume, killing, killing, killing.

Next day we were back in school. I sat in classes. I opened and closed books when I was asked. I tried to play with the other boys. But I couldn't concentrate. I couldn't even make myself feel *present*. My body and my speaking voice were like remote-controlled devices that I operated awkwardly from a solitary hiding place far away where I nursed the secret burden that was to drive my dad to suicide, though for some reason he'd thought it appropriate to pass on to his eleven-year-old son.

Snap. Snap. Snap. I took photos more and more. It helped to detach me from what was going on, taking them and then later downloading them and going through them again and again and again on my computer screen.

Snap. Here is a boy called Douglas teasing me. He's calling me dozy. He's saying I'm mental. I didn't answer him. I took this picture instead. That angered him. He would have smashed my camera if a teacher hadn't come by.

Snap. Snap. This is my father's funeral. This is the coffin with his body inside it, worse for wear no doubt after its thirty-storey fall. Snap. Snap. This is Clarrie with her eyes red from crying, but still taking it all in, making sure that she misses nothing, savours all that there is to see. Snap. These are relatives of some sort – great-aunts and second-cousins-twice-removed and what-not – come over to try and talk to me.

"Your father was such a wonderful man, Thomas, a wonderful man," said an elderly aunt-type lady in a hat with a black veil. "You should be very proud of him."

"Isn't Tom like him?" exclaimed a woman with sticking-out teeth.

"What are *you* going to be when you grow up Tom?" asked the lady in the hat.

Snap, I went, knowing that photographs would soon be all that was left of them.

Snap. Look at the grey clouds piled above them. Look at the wind whipping up those trees.

Snap. Snap. Snap. ☘

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# DANIEL AKSELROD

# and LENNY ROYTER

My whole life I've been trying to reverse the effects of the IF. Not the 'if only I hadn't dumped Kathy' and not the 'if only I studied harder in college' but the big if, as in, what if I never got the IF Chip. That chip is the reason I went to med school, that's why my marriage went to shit, and it's why I'm still staring at the monitors, analyzing EEG charts and MRIs of the brain.

The coffee's cold, the glare of the monitors sharp. The cigarettes keep piling up in the ashtray. I rub my forehead. I feel like I'm close. Just a few more adjustments and the cure will be ready. But the equations don't add up. I'm missing something.

"Maybe you're missing a hug?" asks Mr Fuzzy.

I squeeze my teeth together but keep working.

"Dicky, are you missing a hug?" Mr Fuzzy asks again. He's using that annoying, kids-show voice on purpose. He *knows* I hate it when he does that. "Dicky, let's sing a song together."

"Fuck off," I offer in singsong. "I'm working here," I say and turn to him. A six foot plush camel is staring at me, batting its huge innocent eyes. I switch back to the monitors and pick up my yellow pad, crisscrossed with my notes, the gibberish of my exuberant fantasies. Then I light up another cigarette.

"May I have one of those, Dicky? Sharing means caring, you know." The camel comes closer and nuzzles my arm. I know it's all in my mind, I know better than anyone else that he's just a figment of my imagination, but I can still feel it. I push him away, my fingers drowning in the soft fur.

"Why are you trying to get rid of the chip's effects, Dicky? Aren't I precious? Look at me. I have a camel hump, and a camel nose, and a camel toe!" He laughs. I haven't laughed at that joke since we passed puberty. "Hey, it could have been worse. Tom from accounting, he's stuck with an Easter bunny. An eight foot annoying fuck that keeps making egg jokes." His tone is back to normal – my own voice talking to me, resonating oppressively inside of my cranium. "From the lack of women we have in our life, I think it's safe to assume that your eggs are blue."

I put down the pad and turn to him, fists on hips. He's smoking a cigarette, he's got sunglasses on. I hate it when he smokes in my mind.

"Call me Joe," he says.

I look down to my cigarette pack. I'm surrounded by fucking camels.

"Why am I trying to get rid of the chip's effects? Are you serious? Look at you! I'm a forty year old man stuck with a giant imaginary friend."

"You know I hate it when you call me that, Dicky." The Barney voice is back.

"What should I call you then?"

"Mr Fuzzy. Just like you did when you were little. Or The Fuz! Just like you did in college when you thought you were cool." Now he's got a 50s' leather jacket on with the collar picked up. "Hey!"

"I was cool," I mumble and shrug out of my lab coat.

"Sure you were, slugger. You still are." The fake coat of encouragement makes me hate him even more.

Daniel Akselrod & Lenny Royter were both born in 1980. Both are immigrants to the USA, Lenny from what is now Ukraine and Danny from the current Belarus. They struck up a friendship in high school and started writing together about four years ago.



I shake my head and hang up the lab coat. I take my briefcase and turn off the lights. Mr Fuzzy pads out after me.

Outside the moon is high. It's late and winds lash at me. Again I sacrificed daylight to senseless numbers and obtuse formulas. I never see the sun anymore.

"Want to ride me home, Dicky?" Mr Fuzzy asks. Oh no, I'm not falling for that one again. I hail a cab. We get in.

"What?" the driver asks.

"I didn't say anything yet," I reply.

"No we can't stop for pizza. I'm working. Where to, buddy?" I stay quiet for a moment. In the world of today it's safer to keep silent for a moment longer and make sure that people are talking to you, and not to the ghosts of the IF chip. The driver turns to me questioningly and only then do I tell him where to go.

It's not polite to ask people about their imaginary friends. In reality, it's a painful subject for us all. They're our burdens. But from the few bits and pieces that the cabbie throws at his IF I can ascertain that it's either some sort of an oriental turtle, possibly mutated, or a pony, which is really gay, even for an imaginary friend.

Soon enough we get home. I undress and fall into bed. I surf the waves of exhaustion all the way to la-la land.

I sleep well. I have dreams where I'm still a kid, just around the time my parents bought the chip. I chose Mr Fuzzy myself. Later on I found out he was one of the worst selling models. Something about kids liking squirrels and kittens more than camels. I don't know. I liked him back then. What got me was the color of his fur – that soft desert color. And his eyes – he's got these huge, watery eyes.

We played. We sang. He taught me the ABCs and math in a fun way. He taught me right from wrong when my parents were too busy with work. He had morals boiled down into simple one-liners like "Just say no!" and "Jesus loves you!" The problem with that one was that I'm not even Christian, but I liked him so much I didn't tell my parents that the religion-setting was mixed up. Also, I was afraid of burning in Hell. Things were so much simpler back then. The IF Chips were a brilliant solution for parents too busy or lazy to discipline their kids, a brilliant solution for a world that offered too many seductions and wrong turns. With the Chip there's no reason to worry – Scruffy will guide your kid straight.

The alarm rings.

"Relax, Dicky, I got it." He doesn't get it.

The bed still feels empty without Linda. I hate waking up alone.

"That's why I'm here," Mr Fuzzy says. "Want me to make you breakfast in bed?" I can hardly hear him with the alarm still ringing. Linda left me because of him, because I was distracted all the time. She said she didn't want to share me with a camel. She especially hated me taking The Fuz's advice during our love-making. Oh yeah, like Princess Pooky was so innocent.

Why did the imaginary friends remain behind when the chips were removed? How the hell did they worm their way into our subconscious? The university studies and the foremost psychochemists came to the conclusion that all the recipients of the chip are now left with schizophrenia. Afterwards, they fed us all sorts of anti-psychotics like haloperidol and chlorpromazine.

Clazipan just left me with constipation. That's what I'm working on now for SuperMed – I'm trying to come up with a drug powerful enough to erase the plush, cute psychological scars of our minds. And one day soon I'll do it and then I'll be rid of the fucker.

"Jesus doesn't like it when you curse," Mr Fuzzy admonishes. Well, it's better than his usual 'If you snitch, you're Satan's bitch'.

I struggle out of bed and get ready for work. Fuzzy doesn't shut up, he just keeps on talking. In no time I'm back at the office, sitting behind the screens, scratching away at paper. It's not just for me, it's for the millions of kids of my generation that grew up and have to live with these abusive, corrupt, immoral imaginary friends. The thing is, the friends didn't remain their adorable, innocent selves. They grew up with us. They learned hate and pride and love and lust. They became too fucking human.

"I don't get it, Richard." I look up. Fuzzy almost never uses my full name. It means he's serious. "Why are you doing this? Why are you trying to kill us?"

"It's gone too far. A man's mind is his own. It's sacred, you know? It's not right for me to have to share it with a camel." Some of my co-workers turn, see me staring at the wall, and go back to their tasks.

"Remember sixth grade? When –"

"Don't do that. Don't play on my nostalgia."

"But we had so much fun together. I taught you everything you know." Fuzzy's voice is almost choking, as if he's crying.

"You ruined my life!"

"Hey, keep it down!" my boss yells. "Me and Spoky have to finish this budget report by lunch." He's all alone in his office. And they're not finishing a report, they're playing chess.

"I need my mind back. I need to be alone." I say it but something inside squeezes painfully. "Just some peace and quiet."

"You've never been alone, Dicky. Not since you were four. You won't be able to handle it." Mr Fuzzy bats his huge eyelashes. "All the depressions in the world, all the suffering, the cut wrists and the roof-dives, it's all loneliness."

"And how many people committed suicide because they couldn't cope with their IFs?"

"You know they all went straight to Hell, don't you?" Fuzzy asks as an aside. "I might have been a computer program, but with the chip removed, I'm part of you."

Yeah, the bad part.

Tonight I have a date. No, not with destiny – the formula isn't complete yet. It's a date with a real woman. Fuzzy made me go out and find one. He's right, I am burning out. Every day I spend sweating over spreadsheets and biochemical equations. I'm constantly fatigued and my stool isn't what it used to be. I need to take some stress off. I need to get laid.

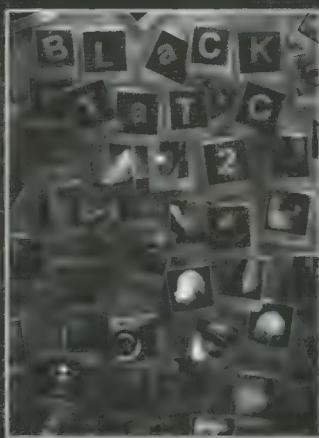
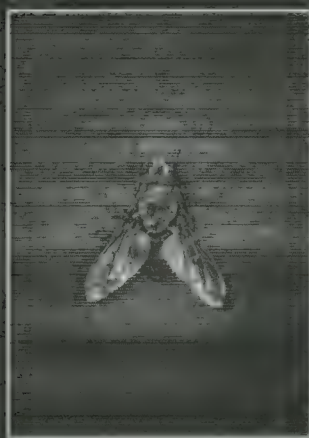
Mr Fuzzy helps me pick out a tie – a yellow one with red dots – a suit and even the right brand of condoms. Flowers, candy, and the next thing I know we're sitting with Candy at a quiet, candlelit restaurant. A waiter comes over and fills our glasses with wine. I smile at Candy and she reciprocates.

"I've got to warn you, I have an IF," I say as a disclaimer.

"Wow! That's, like, so exciting," she says. "When I was a little kid I also had imaginary friends! I had a hamster and a goldfish with long legs and a..." The last one is lost as a long, fuzzy



# BLACK STATIC: TRANSMISSIONS



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muzzle appears to block her from my view. Mr Fuzzy is wide-eyed and jaw wide agape. I push him out the way. "...and also Mr Pickles!" she continues.

That's the difference between normal kids and the IF kids: the normal kids had as many imaginary friends as they wanted and they all left with age.

"So what kind of a friend do you have?"

"Tell her about me. Girls find camels cute."

"I don't want to talk about him. Why don't you tell me more about yourself," I say.

The rest of the date is crash and burn all the way. Candy's an airhead and, besides, I haven't been out on a date in years – my game's off.

"Tell her that the Savior died for her," Father Fuz, wearing a priest's collar and everything, advises. I smile.

"Basically, I think God put me here for a purpose," she says.

"What I really want, is for all creatures, big or small, imaginary or not, to live in a world full of love," she says. Why is she using a kids-show voice?

"Check please," Fuzzy whimpers hoarsely. I suppress a chuckle. "Check! For God's sake! Get us out of here! Check!" Fuzzy is crying on the table. "The bitch is nuts!" She thinks my smile is directed at her, as if I approve, and she continues.

"See, I have this theory that all evil in this world comes from sex," she says. "I think that all creatures should be equal, regardless of gender or species." She keeps talking but all I can see is Mr Fuzzy standing on the table, spitting out water on her.

"The power of Christ compels you, demon!" He's performing an exorcism. "Be gone from this body!" He's got a censer around his neck. I chuckle and nod, wiping tears away from the corner of my eyes.

"Ah, Dick... Dicky, we should go. Now! There's no chance here. Trust me, I've seen deserts more fruitful."

"Hold on, Fuz, maybe if I just keep nodding I'll hump her in the end." I whisper all of this as she explains to the waiter why she's a vegetarian and how all creatures should live in harmony.

"Hump? The only hump you're getting tonight is my camel hump. By the way, I also have camel eyes and a camel..."

"Enough with the camel toe!" I scream. The restaurant is quiet. Everyone's staring at us.

Sufficient to say, things don't go well with Candy. Soon enough we're sitting in a bar, just Fuzzy and me, having a beer. We reminisce about the good old times, laughing, remembering the girls who didn't think that sex was the wellspring of all evil. We play a game of pool and some darts. The final score is two-two.

Eventually, I'm back at home, buzzed and smiling under my camel-hair blankets.

"I love you, Dicky," Mr Fuzzy says.

"I love you too, Mr Fuzzy."

"That's a little gay, Dicky. Jesus doesn't like gay," Mr Fuzzy says.

The morning is alive with the scent of roasted coffee and Xeroxed documents and stale cigarettes. I'm back at work, drowning in my project. Something's still not adding up. I lost weeks of sleep studying sleep patterns and Kappa waves. There are bags under my eyes. I live on beer and coffee. My stomach is churning nothing. I'm almost ready to give up.

"You're killing yourself," Fuzzy says.

"I'm close," I reply.

"I think right now you're doing this on momentum alone, not to get rid of me or any other IFs."



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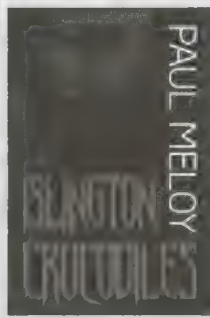
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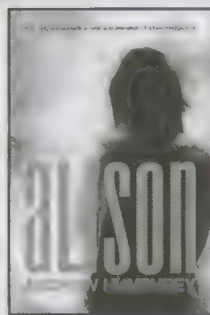
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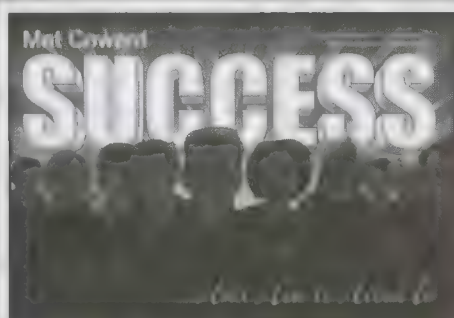
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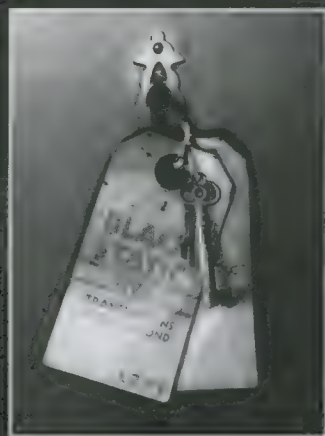








# FROM BEYOND



**"A must-read for those who like their fiction contemporary and uncensored" Ed Gorman**



"You're wrong. I have only one drive," I say and key new numbers into the computer model.

"Am I really that bad?"

"Absolutely," I reply.

"Look me in the eyes, Richard, 'cause I'm serious right now. Do you really want me dead? Do you envision all the consequences of it?" Mr Fuzzy says, and there's something different about him.

I just nod.

"Fine," he says. "Have it your way. You forgot to carry the one. You never were good at arithmetic. My fault, I suppose." His nose points at my notes. I look down and it hits me. I adjust for my mistake and the formula comes together. Diefuzzyol is ready.

That evening, I hijack the lab. I spend the whole night mixing chemicals. The product of my imagination – no pun intended – is ready. Ten years' worth of sleepless nights equals a shiny injection gun in my hand. The magazine is a vial of a blue tincture, and the barrel is a hypodermic syringe. One shot and Mr Fuzzy is gone forever.

I'm on the roof of the lab, waiting for dawn. I'm a sentimental prick, but the sun will rise on a new day today. The victims of the IF will be cured. I will be cured.

Fuzzy is there in a cowboy hat, his toes are by a holster with a six-shooter.

"Let's go out with a bang?" Mr Fuzzy asks. I smile fondly at him, for what I know will be the last time.

The edges of the sky slowly turn purple as the sun begins its hesitant ascent. I sink the needle into my arm. All I have to do is squeeze the trigger, just apply a little bit of pressure and the serum will be pumped into my veins to purify my mind, to bestow its precious curative caress on my damaged, demented

brain. Then I look to Fuzzy. He bats his eyes slowly, watching with a mix of fear and gratitude. Maybe it's just my imagination, but I think he's happy for me.

"I'm happy for you, Richard. I alone out of everyone truly understands the significance of this moment." And it's true. He is the only one that understands me.

The alarm rings. For a moment the bell just keeps going and going.

"I'll get it, honey," Kelly says. Besides being beautiful, she believes that it's the lack of sex that causes evil in this world. And so we fight the darkness together, one night at a time.

She gets up and pulls on her silky, white pajama pants. She walks to the kitchen. I spend a few more blissful moments in bed before sitting up. I hear the kids playing outside, talking to their imaginary friends – the normal kind, not the ones that come in a tiny silicon chip.

Diefuzzyol was a wild success. It made me ridiculously rich. That's why I hear waves crash against the bluff somewhere outside the glass doors of my villa. That's why the walls are covered in paintings, and the windows in rich drapes. It's a good life now.

In another minute, Kelly comes back into the bedroom, burdened by a tray with steaming cups of coffee and a plate hidden by a silver cover.

My gaze travels the length of her body and stops at the place where her silk pajamas are slightly pulled into her privates. I can almost make out the shape of her vulva.

"Is that what I think it is?" Mr Fuzzy wrinkles his muzzle and sits up next to me. He's smoking a Cuban cigar. I hate it when he smokes in my mind. ☘



# his master's voice

/illustrated by paul drummond/





# by hannu rajaniemi

Before the concert, we steal the master's head. The necropolis is a dark forest of concrete mushrooms in the blue Antarctic night. We huddle inside the utility fog bubble attached to the steep southern wall of the *nunatak*, the ice valley.

The cat washes itself with a pink tongue. It reeks of infinite confidence.

"Get ready," I tell it. "We don't have all night."

It gives me a mildly offended look and dons its armour. The quantum dot fabric envelops its striped body like living oil. It purrs faintly and tests the diamond-bladed claws against an icy outcropping of rock. The sound grates my teeth and the razor-winged butterflies in my belly wake up. I look at the bright, impenetrable firewall of the city of the dead. It shimmers like chained northern lights in my AR vision.

I decide that it's time to ask the Big Dog to bark. My helmet laser casts a one-nanosecond prayer of light at the indigo sky: just enough to deliver one quantum bit up there into the Wild. Then we wait. My tail wags and a low growl builds up in my belly.

Right on schedule, it starts to rain red fractal code. My augmented reality vision goes down, unable to process the dense torrent of information falling upon the necropolis firewall like monsoon rain. The chained aurora borealis flicker and vanish.

"Go!" I shout at the cat, wild joy exploding in me, the joy of running after the Small Animal of my dreams. "Go now!"

The cat leaps into the void. The wings of the armour open and grab the icy wind, and the cat rides the draft down like a grinning Chinese kite.

---

It's difficult to remember the beginning now. There were no words then, just sounds and smells: metal and brine, the steady drumming of waves against pontoons. And there were three perfect things in the world: my bowl, the Ball, and the Master's firm hand on my neck.

I know now that the Place was an old oil rig that the Master had bought. It smelled bad when we arrived, stinging oil and chemicals. But there were hiding places, secret nooks and crannies. There was a helicopter landing pad where the Master threw the ball for me. It fell into the sea many times, but the Master's bots – small metal dragonflies – always fetched it when I couldn't.

The Master was a god. When he was angry, his voice was an invisible whip. His smell was a god-smell that filled the world.

While he worked, I barked at the seagulls or stalked the cat. We fought a few times, and I still have a pale scar on my nose. But we developed an understanding. The dark places of the rig belonged to the cat, and I reigned over the deck and the sky: we were the Hades and Apollo of the Master's realm.

But at night, when the Master watched old movies or listened to records on his old rattling gramophone we lay at his feet together. Sometimes the Master smelled lonely and let me sleep next to him in his small cabin, curled up in the god-smell and warmth.

It was a small world, but it was all we knew.

The Master spent a lot of time working, fingers dancing on the keyboard projected on his mahogany desk. And every night he went to the Room: the only place on the rig where I wasn't allowed.

It was then that I started to dream about the Small Animal. I remember its smell even now, alluring and inexplicable: buried bones and fleeing rabbits, irresistible.

In my dreams, I chased it along a sandy beach, a tasty trail of tiny footprints that I followed along bendy pathways and into tall grass. I never lost sight of it for more than a second: it was always a flash of white fur just at the edge of my vision.

One day it spoke to me. "Come," it said. "Come and learn."

The Small Animal's island was full of lost places. Labyrinthine caves, lines drawn in sand that became words when I looked at them, smells that sang songs from the Master's gramophone. It taught me, and I learned: I was more awake every time I woke up. And when I saw the cat looking at the spiderbots with a new awareness, I knew that it, too, went to a place at night.

I came to understand what the Master said when he spoke. The sounds that had only meant *angry* or *happy* before became the words of my god. He noticed, smiled, and ruffled my fur. After that he started speaking to us more, me and the cat, during the long evenings when the sea beyond the windows was black as oil and the waves made the whole rig ring like a bell. His voice was dark as a well, deep and gentle. He spoke of an island, his home, an island in the middle of a great sea. I smelled bitterness, and for the first time I understood that there were always words behind words, never spoken.

---

The cat catches the updraft perfectly: it floats still for a split second, and then clings to the side of the tower. Its claws put the smart concrete to sleep: code that makes the building think that the cat is a bird or a shard of ice carried by the wind.

The cat hisses and spits. The disassembler nanites from its stomach cling to the wall and start eating a round hole in it. The wait is excruciating. The cat locks the exomuscles of its armour and hangs there patiently. Finally, there is a mouth with jagged edges in the wall, and it slips in. My heart pounds as I switch from the AR view to the cat's iris cameras. It moves through the ventilation shaft like lightning, like an acrobat, jerky, hyperaccelerated movements, metabolism on overdrive. My tail twitches again. *We are coming, Master, I think. We are coming.*

---

I lost my ball the day the wrong master came.

I looked everywhere. I spent an entire day sniffing every corner and even braved the dark corridors of the cat's realm beneath the deck, but I could not find it. In the end, I got hungry and returned to the cabin. And there were two masters. Four hands stroking my coat. Two gods, true and false.

I barked. I did not know what to do. The cat looked at me with a mixture of pity and disdain and rubbed itself on both of their legs.



"Calm down," said one of the masters. "Calm down. There are four of us now."

I learned to tell them apart, eventually: by that time Small Animal had taught me to look beyond smells and appearances. The master I remembered was a middle-aged man with greying hair, stocky-bodied. The new master was young, barely a man, much slimmer and with the face of a mahogany cherub. The master tried to convince me to play with the new master, but I did not want to. His smell was too familiar, everything else too alien. In my mind, I called him the wrong master.

The two masters worked together, walked together and spent a lot of time talking together using words I did not understand. I was jealous. Once I even bit the wrong master. I was left on the deck for the night as a punishment, even though it was stormy and I was afraid of thunder. The cat, on the other hand, seemed to thrive in the wrong master's company, and I hated it for it.

I remember the first night the masters argued.

"Why did you do it?" asked the wrong master.

"You know," said the master. "You remember." His tone was dark. "Because someone has to show them we own ourselves."

"So, you own me?" said the wrong master. "Is that what you think?"

"Of course not," said the master. "Why do you say that?"

"Someone could claim that. You took a genetic algorithm and told it to make ten thousand of you, with random variations, pick the ones that would resemble your ideal son, the one you could love. Run until the machine runs out of capacity. Then print. It's illegal, you know. For a reason."

"That's not what the plurals think. Besides, this is my place. The only laws here are mine."

"You've been talking to the plurals too much. They are no longer human."

"You sound just like VecTech's PR bots."

"I sound like you. Your doubts. Are you sure you did the right thing? I'm not a Pinocchio. You are not a Gepetto."

The master was quiet for a long time.

"What if I am," he finally said. "Maybe we need Gepettos. Nobody creates anything new any more, let alone wooden dolls that come to life. When I was young, we all thought something wonderful was on the way. Diamond children in the sky, angels out of machines. Miracles. But we gave up just before the blue fairy came."

"I am not your miracle."

"Yes, you are."

"You should at least have made yourself a woman," said the wrong master in a knife-like voice. "It might have been less frustrating."

I did not hear the blow, I felt it. The wrong master let out a cry, rushed out and almost stumbled on me. The master watched him go. His lips moved, but I could not hear the words. I wanted to comfort him and made a little sound, but he did not even look at me, went back to the cabin and locked the door. I scratched the door, but he did not open, and I went up to the deck to look for the Ball again.

Finally, the cat finds the master's chamber.

It is full of heads. They float in the air, bodiless, suspended in diamond cylinders. The tower executes the command we sent

into its drugged nervous system, and one of the pillars begins to blink. *Master, master*, I sing quietly as I see the cold blue face beneath the diamond. But at the same time I know it's not the master, not yet.

The cat reaches out with its prosthetic. The smart surface yields like a soap bubble. "Careful now, careful," I say. The cat hisses angrily but obeys, spraying the head with preserver nanites and placing it gently into its gel-lined backpack.

The necropolis is finally waking up: the damage the heavenly hacker did has almost been repaired. The cat heads for its escape route and goes to quicktime again. I feel its staccato heartbeat through our sensory link.

It is time to turn out the lights. My eyes polarise to sunglass-black. I lift the gauss launcher, marvelling at the still tender feel of the Russian hand grafts. I pull the trigger. The launcher barely twitches in my grip, and a streak of light shoots up to the sky. The nuclear payload is tiny, barely a decaton, not even a proper plutonium warhead but a hafnium micronuke. But it is enough to light a small sun above the mausoleum city for a moment, enough for a focused maser pulse that makes it as dead as its inhabitants for a moment.

The light is a white blow, almost tangible in its intensity, and the gorge looks like it is made of bright ivory. White noise hisses in my ears like the cat when it's angry.

For me, smells were not just sensations, they were my reality. I know now that that is not far from the truth: smells are molecules, parts of what they represent.

The wrong master smelled wrong. It confused me at first: almost a god-smell, but not quite, the smell of a fallen god.

And he did fall, in the end.

I slept on the master's couch when it happened. I woke up to bare feet shuffling on the carpet and heavy breathing, torn away from a dream of the Small Animal trying to teach me the multiplication table.

The wrong master looked at me. "Good boy," he said. "Shh." I wanted to bark, but the godlike smell was too strong. And so I just wagged my tail, slowly, uncertainly. The wrong master sat on the couch next to me and scratched my ears absently.

"I remember you," he said. "I know why he made you. A living childhood memory." He smiled and smelled friendlier than ever before. "I know how that feels." Then he sighed, got up and went into the Room. And then I knew that he was about to do something bad, and started barking as loudly as I could. The master woke up and when the wrong master returned, he was waiting.

"What have you done?" he asked, face chalk-white.

The wrong master gave him a defiant look. "Just what you'd have done. You're the criminal, not me. Why should I suffer? You don't own me."

"I could kill you," said the master, and his anger made me whimper with fear. "I could tell them I was you. They would believe me."

"Yes," said the wrong master. "But you are not going to."

The master sighed. "No," he said. "I'm not."

I take the dragonfly over the cryotower. I see the cat on the roof and whimper from relief. The plane lands lightly. I'm not much of a pilot, but the lobotomised mind of the daimon – an illegal



copy of a 21st Century jet ace – is. The cat climbs in, and we shoot towards the stratosphere at Mach 5, wind caressing the plane's quantum dot skin.

"Well done," I tell the cat and wag my tail. It looks at me with yellow slanted eyes and curls up on its acceleration gel bed. I look at the container next to it. Is that a whiff of the god-smell or is it just my imagination?

In any case, it is enough to make me curl up in deep happy dog-sleep, and for the first time in years I dream of the Ball and the Small Animal, sliding down the ballistic orbit's steep back.

They came from the sky before the sunrise. The master went up on the deck wearing a suit that smelled new. He had the cat in his lap: it purred quietly. The wrong master followed, hands behind his back.

There were three machines, black-shelled scarabs with many legs and transparent wings. They came in low, raising a white-frothed wake behind them. The hum of their wings hurt my ears as they landed on the deck.

The one in the middle vomited a cloud of mist that shimmered in the dim light, swirled in the air and became a black-skinned woman who had no smell. By then I had learned that things without a smell could still be dangerous, so I barked at her until the master told me to be quiet.

"Mr Takeshi," she said. "You know why we are here."

The master nodded.

"You don't deny your guilt?"

"I do," said the master. "This raft is technically a sovereign state, governed by my laws. Autogenesis is not a crime here."

"This raft was a sovereign state," said the woman. "Now it belongs to VecTech. Justice is swift, Mr Takeshi. Our lawbots broke your constitution ten seconds after Mr Takeshi here –" she nodded at the wrong master – "told us about his situation. After that, we had no choice. The WIPO quantum judge we consulted has condemned you to the slow zone for three hundred and fourteen years, and as the wronged party we have been granted execution rights in this matter. Do you have anything to say before we act?"

The master looked at the wrong master, face twisted like a mask of wax. Then he set the cat down gently and scratched my ears. "Look after them," he told the wrong master. "I'm ready."

The beetle in the middle moved, too fast for me to see. The master's grip on the loose skin on my neck tightened for a moment like my mother's teeth, and then let go. Something warm splattered on my coat and there was a dark, deep smell of blood in the air.

Then he fell. I saw his head in a floating soap bubble that one of the beetles swallowed. Another opened its belly for the wrong master. And then they were gone, and the cat and I were alone on the bloody deck.

The cat wakes me up when we dock with the *Marquis of Carabas*. The zeppelin swallows our dragonfly drone like a whale. It is a crystal cigar, and its nanospun sapphire spine glows faint blue. The Fast City is a sky full of neon stars six kilometres below us, anchored to the airship with elevator cables. I can see the liftspiders climbing them, far below, and sigh with relief. The guests are still arriving, and we are not too late. I keep my per-

sonal firewall clamped shut: I know there is a torrent of messages waiting beyond.

We rush straight to the lab. I prepare the scanner while the cat takes the master's head out very, very carefully. The fractal bush of the scanner comes out of its nest, molecule-sized disassembler fingers bristling. I have to look away when it starts eating the master's face. I cheat and flee to VR, to do what I do best.

After half an hour, we are ready. The nanofab spits out black plastic discs, and the airship drones ferry them to the concert hall. The metallic butterflies in my belly return, and we head for the make-up salon. The Sergeant is already there, waiting for us: judging by the cigarette stubs on the floor, he has been waiting for a while. I wrinkle my nose at the stench.

"You are late," says our manager. "I hope you know what the hell you are doing. This show's got more digs than the Turin clone's birthday party."

"That's the idea," I say and let Anette spray me with cosmetic fog. It tickles and makes me sneeze, and I give the cat a jealous look: as usual, it is perfectly at home with its own image consultant. "We are more popular than Jesus."

They get the DJs on in a hurry, made by the last human tailor on Savile Row. "This'll be a good skin," says Anette. "Mahogany with a touch of purple." She goes on, but I can't hear. The music is already in my head. The master's voice.

The cat saved me.

I don't know if it meant to do it or not: even now, I have a hard time understanding it. It hissed at me, its back arched. Then it jumped forward and scratched my nose: it burned like a piece of hot coal. That made me mad, weak as I was. I barked furiously and chased the cat around the deck. Finally, I collapsed, exhausted, and realised that I was hungry. The autokitchen down in the master's cabin still worked, and I knew how to ask for food. But when I came back, the master's body was gone: the waste disposal bots had thrown it into the sea. That's when I knew that he would not be coming back.

I curled up in his bed alone that night: the god-smell that lingered there was all I had. That, and the Small Animal.

It came to me that night on the dreamshore, but I did not chase it this time. It sat on the sand, looked at me with its little red eyes and waited.

"Why?" I asked. "Why did they take the master?"

"You wouldn't understand," it said. "Not yet."

"I want to understand. I want to know."

"All right," it said. "Everything you do, remember, think, smell – everything – leaves traces, like footprints in the sand. And it's possible to read them. Imagine that you follow another dog: you know where it has eaten and urinated and everything else it has done. The humans can do that to the mindprints. They can record them and make another you inside a machine, like the scentless screenpeople that your master used to watch. Except that the screendog will think it's you."

"Even though it has no smell?" I asked, confused.

"It thinks it does. And if you know what you're doing, you can give it a new body as well. You could die and the copy would be so good that no one can tell the difference. Humans have been doing it for a long time. Your master was one of the first, a long time ago. Far away, there are a lot of humans with machine



bodies, humans who never die, humans with small bodies and big bodies, depending on how much they can afford to pay, people who have died and come back."

I tried to understand: without the smells, it was difficult. But its words awoke a mad hope.

"Does it mean that the master is coming back?" I asked, panting.

"No. Your master broke human law. When people discovered the pawprints of the mind, they started making copies of themselves. Some made many, more than the grains of sand on the beach. That caused chaos. Every machine, every device everywhere, had mad dead minds in them. The plurals, people called them, and were afraid. And they had their reasons to be afraid. Imagine that your Place had a thousand dogs, but only one Ball."

My ears flopped at the thought.

"That's how humans felt," said the Small Animal. "And so they passed a law: only one copy per person. The humans – VecTech – who had invented how to make copies mixed watermarks into people's minds, rights management software that was supposed to stop the copying. But some humans – like your master – found out how to erase them."

"The wrong master," I said quietly.

"Yes," said the Small Animal. "He did not want to be an illegal copy. He turned your master in."

"I want the master back," I said, anger and longing beating their wings in my chest like caged birds.

"And so does the cat," said the Small Animal gently. And it was only then that I saw the cat there, sitting next to me on the beach, eyes glimmering in the sun. It looked at me and let out a single conciliatory miaow.

After that, the Small Animal was with us every night, teaching.

Music was my favourite. The Small Animal showed me how I could turn music into smells and find patterns in it, like the tracks of huge, strange animals. I studied the master's old records and the vast libraries of his virtual desk, and learned to remix them into smells that I found pleasant.

I don't remember which one of us came up with the plan to save the master. Maybe it was the cat: I could only speak to it properly on the island of dreams, and see its thoughts appear as patterns on the sand. Maybe it was the Small Animal, maybe it was me. After all the nights we spent talking about it, I no longer know. But that's where it began, on the island: that's where we became arrows fired at a target.

Finally, we were ready to leave. The master's robots and nanofac spun us an open-source glider, a white-winged bird.

In my last dream the Small Animal said goodbye. It hummed to itself when I told it about our plans.

"Remember me in your dreams," it said.

"Are you not coming with us?" I asked, bewildered.

"My place is here," it said. "And it's my turn to sleep now, and to dream."

"Who are you?"

"Not all the plurals disappeared. Some of them fled to space, made new worlds there. And there is a war on, even now. Perhaps you will join us there, one day, where the big dogs live."

It laughed. "For old times' sake?" It dived into the waves and started running, became a great proud dog with a white coat, muscles flowing like water. And I followed, for one last time.

The sky was grey when we took off. The cat flew the plane using a neural interface, goggles over its eyes. We swept over the dark waves and were underway. The raft became a small dirty spot in the sea. I watched it recede and realised that I'd never found my Ball.

Then there was a thunderclap and a dark pillar of water rose up to the sky from where the raft had been. I didn't mourn: I knew that the Small Animal wasn't there any more.

The sun was setting when we came to the Fast City.

I knew what to expect from the Small Animal's lessons, but I could not imagine what it would be like. Mile-high skyscrapers that were self-contained worlds, with their artificial plasma suns and bonsai parks and miniature shopping malls. Each of them housed a billion lilliputs, poor and quick: humans whose consciousness lived in a nanocomputer smaller than a fingertip. Immortals who could not afford to utilise the resources of the overpopulated Earth more than a mouse. The city was surrounded by a halo of glowing fairies, tiny winged moravecs that flitted about like humanoid fireflies and the waste heat from their overclocked bodies draped the city in an artificial twilight.

The citymind steered us to a landing area. It was fortunate that the cat was flying: I just stared at the buzzing things with my mouth open, afraid I'd drown in the sounds and the smells.

We sold our plane for scrap and wandered into the bustle of the city, feeling like *daikaju* monsters. The social agents that the Small Animal had given me were obsolete, but they could still weave us into the ambient social networks. We needed money, we needed work.

And so I became a musician.

The ballroom is a hemisphere in the centre of the airship. It is filled to capacity. Innumerable quickbeings shimmer in the air like living candles, and the suits of the fleshed ones are no less exotic. A woman clad in nothing but autumn leaves smiles at me. Tinkerbells clones surround the cat. Our bodyguards, armed obsidian giants, open a way for us to the stage where the gramophones wait. A rustle moves through the crowd. The air around us is pregnant with ghosts, the avatars of a million fleshless fans. I wag my tail. The scentspace is intoxicating: perfume, fleshbodies, the unsmells of moravec bodies. And the fallen god smell of the wrong master, hiding somewhere within.

We get on the stage on our hindlegs, supported by prosthesis shoes. The gramophone forest looms behind us, their horns like flowers of brass and gold. We cheat, of course: the music is analog and the gramophones are genuine, but the grooves in the black discs are barely a nanometer thick, and the needles are tipped with quantum dots.

We take our bows and the storm of handclaps begins.

"Thank you," I say when the thunder of it finally dies. "We have kept quiet about the purpose of this concert as long as possible. But I am finally in a position to tell you that this is a charity show."

I smell the tension in the air, copper and iron.

"We miss someone," I say. "He was called Shimoda Takeshi, and now he's gone."

The cat lifts the conductor's baton and turns to face the gramophones. I follow, and step into the soundspace we've built, the



place where music is smells and sounds.

The master is in the music.

It took five human years to get to the top. I learned to love the audiences: I could smell their emotions and create a mix of music for them that was just right. And soon I was no longer a giant dog DJ among lilliputs, but a little terrier in a forest of dancing human legs. The cat's gladiator career lasted a while, but soon it joined me as a performer in the virtual dramas I designed. We performed for rich fleshies in the Fast City, Tokyo and New York. I loved it. I howled at Earth in the sky in the Sea of Tranquility.

But I always knew that it was just the first phase of the Plan.

We turn him into music. VecTech owns his brain, his memories, his mind. But we own the music.

Law is code. A billion people listening to our master's voice. Billion minds downloading the Law At Home packets embedded in it, bombarding the quantum judges until they give him back.

It's the most beautiful thing I've ever made. The cat stalks the genetic algorithm jungle, lets the themes grow and then pounces on them, devours them. I just chase them for the joy of the chase alone, not caring whether or not I catch them.

It's our best show ever.

Only when it's over, I realise that no one is listening. The audience is frozen. The fairies and the fastpeople float in the air like flies trapped in amber. The moravecs are silent statues. Time stands still.

The sound of one pair of hands, clapping.

"I'm proud of you," says the wrong master.

I fix my bow tie and smile a dog's smile, a cold snake coiling in my belly. The god-smell comes and tells me that I should throw myself onto the floor, wag my tail, bare my throat to the divine being standing before me.

But I don't.

"Hello, Nipper," the wrong master says.

I clamp down the low growl rising in my throat and turn it into words. "What did you do?"

"We suspended them. Back doors in the hardware. Digital rights management."

His mahogany face is still smooth: he does not look a day older, wearing a dark suit with a VecTech tie pin. But his eyes are tired. "Really, I'm impressed. You covered your tracks admirably. We thought you were furries. Until I realised -"

A distant thunder interrupts him.

"I promised him I'd look after you. That's why you are still alive. You don't have to do this. You don't owe him anything. Look at yourselves: who would have thought you could come this far? Are you going to throw that all away because of some atavistic sense of animal loyalty? Not that you have a choice, of course. The plan didn't work."

The cat lets out a steam pipe hiss.

"You misunderstand," I say. "The concert was just a diversion."

The cat moves like a black-and-yellow flame. Its claws flash, and the wrong master's head comes off. I whimper at the aroma of blood polluting the god-smell. The cat licks its lips. There is a crimson stain on its white shirt.

The zeppelin shakes, pseudomatter armour sparkling. The dark sky around the *Marquis* is full of fire-breathing beetles. We

rush past the human statues in the ballroom and into the laboratory.

The cat does the dirty work, granting me a brief escape into virtual abstraction. I don't know how the master did it, years ago, broke VecTech's copy protection watermarks. I can't do the same, no matter how much the Small Animal taught me. So I have to cheat, recover the marked parts from somewhere else.

The wrong master's brain.

The part of me that was born on the Small Animal's island takes over and fits the two patterns together, like pieces of a puzzle. They fit, and for a brief moment, the master's voice is in my mind, for real this time.

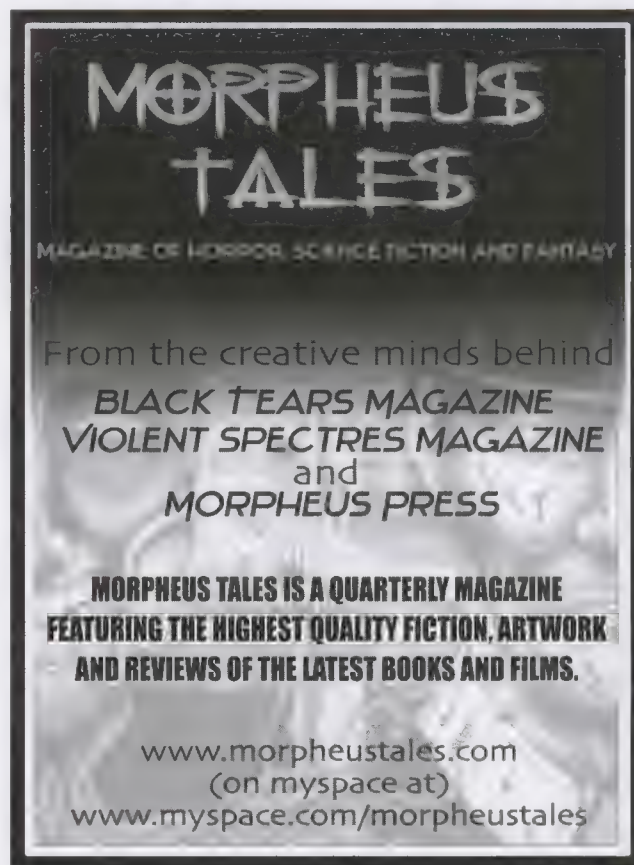
The cat is waiting, already in its clawed battlesuit, and I don my own. The *Marquis of Carabas* is dying around us. To send the master on his way, we have to disengage the armour.

The cat miaows faintly and hands me something red. An old plastic ball with toothmarks, smelling of the sun and the sea, with a few grains of sand rattling inside.

"Thanks," I say. The cat says nothing, just opens a door into the zeppelin's skin. I whisper a command, and the master is under way in a neutrino stream, shooting up towards an island in a blue sea. Where the gods and big dogs live forever.

We dive through the door together, down into the light and flame. ✨

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# THE CORNER OF THE CIRCLE

I was thirteen when I first went to New York. A neighbour put me on the bus at Freeport. The driver and the passengers looked after me. My Aunt Janine was meant to meet me in Manhattan, but when we rolled into the Port Authority, long hours later, she was nowhere to be seen. Instead, another woman – dark-haired and, it seemed to me, almost impossibly tall – approached, announced her name was Imogen, and offered me a cigarette. I took it without thinking. “Aunt Imogen,” she said. “But you can drop the Aunt.” She lit my cigarette then lit her own. A man pushing a broom blew off at her for smoking in the building, and she threw him such a look I thought he would have crumpled on the spot. She nodded to my bag. “Pick up,” she said. “We’re getting out of here.”

Aunt Imogen set off at a ferocious pace. I’d scarcely time to look around, dodging through the crowd, remembering to put my cigarette up to my lips – I didn’t smoke back then, I’d never learnt how to inhale. We’d gone about a hundred yards before it happened. A sudden rush of air made me look up, and then a trio of Pafiddians shot out from a side-street, whizzed over our heads, and one – I can remember this distinctly – waved his baseball cap and whooped just like a cowboy. They rode little silver flying-frames, and zigzagged back and forth across the avenue; they circled, swooped, then lofted quickly, zoomed over a billboard, and were gone behind an office block. My cigarette burned out forgotten in my hand. My new companion had to come back and collect me. “Forget ‘em,” she said. “They’re not exactly aristocracy, you know.”

I raised my cigarette. The ash fell on my coat. “Drop it,” she ordered. She looked me up and down, as if for the first time. She frowned. “You eaten lately? Eat on the bus?”

“I’m fine,” I said.

“OK.” She put her head on one side. “Take it you didn’t eat, then.”

She led me up a flight of stairs into a food bar, self-service; I prowled the rows of trays, asking her over and over, “What’s this? What’s this?” My plate was soon piled high. Aunt Imogen, I noticed, had been more selective; just a little meat, some salad and some rice.

“You’re gonna be a price to keep,” she said. Only she never said she wouldn’t pay.

We sat across from one another at a long, wooden table. She asked about my mum, my dad, my schooling, but she seemed as little interested in my answers as I was in giving them. When I reached out for the water jug she saw the bruising on my arm and made me roll my sleeve up.

“How’d you get that?”

“Accident.” I stuffed my mouth with food; pork, peppers, sauce.

“What kind of accident?”

“Jus,” I chewed, “you know, acshiden.”

She reached out. She fit her hand around my arm, stretching to match her fingers to the bruise. “Accident?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Alright.” She nodded slowly. “How long you here for? With Janine?”

I shrugged. “Couple of weeks. Month.”

“We’ll see each other,” she said, without a smile. I rolled my sleeve down, determined I would never let it ride up and expose my skin again.

Back on the street, she asked me, “Anything else you want?”

I thought about it. Then I said, “I’d like another cigarette....?”

She paused a moment, reached into her bag, and offered me the pack. “Not gonna teach you how to smoke it, mind,” she said.

We took the J train into Brooklyn. From the bridge, the river looked as grey and smooth as sheet steel, and the great wreck of the Tamalogian ship, half sunk beneath the surface, matched it shade for shade, as if the two were of a piece. I shut my eyes. Fatigue was catching up with me. I think I dozed; it seemed just moments later Imogen was shaking me awake. “Our stop,” she said.

Out on the street, she hailed a taxi, arm up in a spiky and imperious salute. She seemed as fierce as a Tsarina then. In ten minutes, we’d reached our destination, and I was bundled out, into my Aunt Janine’s house.

It was old and gloomy; light from the downstairs window was eclipsed by a gigantic air conditioner. Aunt Janine – my mother’s sister – darted this way and that, fussing round me, offering me Gatorade, chocolate and cold pizza, till Aunt Imogen, in a voice like a crow’s, called out, “What do I have to do to get a cup of coffee here?”

I didn’t see how she could be related, either to my mother or Janine (nor was she, as I found out; not by blood, at any rate). Nonetheless, her word was law. Janine scuttled away into the kitchen. A second later, Imogen put out her latest cigarette (here, in Janine’s company, I no longer smoked) and strutted after her. I heard her in the kitchen, issuing commands.

“No, that’s too weak,” she said, dismissively.

“It’s how I always make it.”

“And it’s too weak.”

They came back to join me, Imogen clutching a beaker full of something you could likely use to metal roads. They sat down.

“And how are you?” Janine asked, still addressing Imogen. “How’s Adrian?”

There was a sing-song in her tone, a gentle mockery, but Imogen ignored it.

“Adrian is fine,” she said. “And so am I.”

For the remainder of my stay I drank black coffee, strong as tar, and never once complained about the way my little heart would start to thump after the third or second gulp.

In Janine I saw my mother, short and plump and flushed with effort (I am tall, thin, pale, like my dad). But she was not my mother. Physically, and in some aspects of character, she might resemble her, but Janine had brought up two sons single handed when her husband Eric died, and this had made a difference.



# TIM LEES

—illustrated by—  
WARWICK FRASER-COOMBE





(Eric's pictures hung, scattered through the house, as if the whole place were a shrine to him. She must have found it comforting; I found it creepy.) One of the sons lived upstate, was married, and I never saw him. The younger, Ken, dropped by each week with groceries – three or four large plastic bags, bulging with food. His arms had been painted with tattoos till they looked like lizard skin. He'd hang around, drink beer, then go up to the attic room and smoke a blunt. Janine would never mention this, as if she couldn't recognise the smell, or, more likely, didn't want to. She said he was a student. I learned later that, while he might be registered at City College, he worked days at a meat-packing plant, made extra money sneaking out prime cuts for sale to anyone who'd pay. We always ate well after Ken came round.

Janine did her best to help me settle in. She brought me hot milk and cookies, sat at my bedside as if I were sick, and then, very tentatively, delicately, said, "You do know why you're here, don't you?"

I nodded between bites. "I guess."

She watched me, frowning, her lips pressed tight until her mouth appeared to sink into her face and vanish. I think she wanted to say more but couldn't find the words. "Well," she said. "Let's make the best of it." As she got up to go, she added, "And don't worry. It'll all work out, you'll see."

Outside, a big truck rumbled past. The windows rattled angrily.

One night my mother rang. Already now her voice seemed different, distant from me in far more than miles. I listened as if listening to a stranger. "I love you," she said. "You know that, don't you? I love you and I always will."

I felt my stomach tighten. "Sure," I said.

"You love me too, don't you?"

They were the words she always used. My belly made a knot, like she was wringing something out of me. I told her, yes, of course I did, of course I did, I always would.

I waited for what seemed a long time, till she put the phone down.

The next few days I hung around the house. I'd promised Aunt Janine I wouldn't go into Manhattan by myself, yet Manhattan was the one place that I truly longed to see. Deprived of that, I grew lazy, listless and unmotivated. The height of my ambition was to sample the sixty-two flavours at the local ice cream parlour (I never did get to the avocado). Sometimes I saw other kids there, but I seldom spoke to them. I was solitary, just like at home.

My fourth day there, the ship came in.

The portal was in Sheepshead Bay. Not far away.

Not far enough, some people said.

I was sitting on my Aunt's stoop, sipping at a can of Cola, when a sudden shift in light made me look up. It seemed a cloud had passed across the sun; but the sky was hot and empty, the blank blue of a New York summer. I stood up. Something was happening... High above the rooftops, colours flickered, pinks and purples, streaks of green, a pale aurora flaring into life. A jogger in the park across the street turned round to get a better view. The dog walkers looked up. Even the kids broke off their ball game, put their hands up to their brows, and stared; while I, too, put my hand up to my eyes.

And suddenly!

Something shot across the sky, flashing silver, and a white wake spread behind it like a ribbon. I ran into the street. Already now, the ship was gone. I thought the show was over. I was wrong.

The sound came next. Like thunder, rumbling through the streets. It seemed to have no source, no one direction, but to prowl and creep, first here, then there. I felt it in the ground, the air. I hardly noticed the way everyone was leaving: the joggers, the dog walkers, the ball-players – heading for cover.

I stood there, in the middle of the road, and didn't even think to look for cars.

The litter in the gutter stirred, rose, shifted. Papers in a bin crawled slowly out, and then the bin itself clattered over, rolled along the sidewalk, spilling garbage. I hugged myself. I wore a T-shirt, shorts; just moments back, the air had been oppressive, summer-hot. Now it was chill. I saw figures huddled by the bandstand. A door slammed on the street. And with a speed that in itself was shocking, the wind came up. It raced around the park, ripped leaves from off the trees. It whisked the contents of the garbage cans up high into the air, it spun them round, a storm of candy wrappers, cans and plastic bags all leaping up, the wind a carousel, a hurricane. Too late, I realised that I wanted to be back indoors. The cold was now intense. I ran for home. But even as I reached the door, the noise, and the wind, began to die. I turned; the park was utterly transformed. A twinkling of frost lay on the grass, the trees all looked like they'd been dusted down with icing sugar.

Winter lasted fifteen minutes. Then summer came back.

The litter had been scattered everywhere.

I raised my drink can to my lips, and got ice. The drink had frozen solid.

Later, I switched the TV on, to watch the news, but there was nothing. The ships came by so frequently, they didn't even merit comment any more.

I told Ken about it. He wasn't a great audience – too stoned to pay attention; too familiar with the whole thing to be awed. But when I finished, after an inordinately long pause, long enough for me to guess our conversation was already done, he nodded me towards him.

"See," he said. "See here. What you need..."

He smelt of marijuana, and tobacco, and something else – bleach, I think, from washing down the floors at work. "Need one'a these." He pulled his cap off, held it out.

I took it. Turned it over. The inside had been lined with tinfoil; the same stuff Mum would wrap the turkey in at Thanksgiving.

I said, "Uh...?"

He took the cap back, fit it snugly on his head. "Keep the rays out, see? The mind rays." He nodded to himself, and felt in his pockets for his cigarettes.

Later, I told him I was due to meet Aunt Imogen tomorrow; that she was going to show me round Manhattan.

"Yeah, well," he said. "Need more than a tin hat keep you safe from her. That's for sure..."

"So," Aunt Imogen folded her arms. "What's your agenda? What's your itinerary?"

I'd thought she'd have a plan, a tour arranged. Instead, she



looked at me; she wanted something personal, uniquely mine. I floundered for a moment. Then I said, "Yesterday..." and I talked about the ship, and how it might be good for me to find out more, good for my education, maybe, and –

She rounded on me suddenly, her eyes like fire. "Janine put you up to this?" I shook my head. Imogen's brows made an aggressive V. It took a moment till I realised her anger wasn't aimed at me. "You sure?"

"Sure."

"Alright," she said. Her frown smoothed, slowly, as if still uncertain; then she nodded, put her chin up, a pioneer surveying a new land. "All-a-righty. So let's go see what we can do."

New Yorkers walk. I hadn't been prepared for it; not the pace Aunt Imogen would hit, at least. Hurrying me up, she dug into her handbag. "Here," she said. "You're gonna start, I know, so let's start now."

She handed me a cigarette.

It was a huge building, with crowds of people going in and out; a student film crew on the steps was busy interviewing visitors. A young man stepped towards us with a clipboard. Imogen blanked him, so efficiently he froze in mid-step, pitch still on his lips. I shrugged at him apologetically, then followed her inside.

This then, was the American Museum of Natural History, and if at first I balked at spending time there – on my first day in Manhattan! – I soon changed my mind. We strolled among the monstrous skeletons, and Imogen, making an effort to amuse, would cringe from this creature or that, pretend to throw a spear or hide behind the other exhibits. Between, she'd glance at me, checking her pantomime had the desired effect. I'd thought her too austere for horseplay. It struck me she was nervous, and she wanted, for reasons I still couldn't see, to please me. I smiled back, politely. She no longer seemed quite adult; not like the other adults I knew, anyway.

At last, she led me upstairs, to a new exhibit, and I understood – or thought I understood – just why she'd brought me here.

There was a photo of the Sheepshead portal. It reached from floor to ceiling, its colours bright and strong – I think somebody famous must have taken it, although I don't remember who. The gate was the size of a skyscraper. A ribbon of white cloud clung to its upper slopes, and the metal of its casing gleamed and flared under the sun. Within its muzzle, nothing was visible; a darkness, like the dark of space, to which, when triggered, it would grant a brief and one-way access. Yet the strangest thing of all was how it floated, this immense construction, hovering above the waters of the Bay, its base reflected clear and still as in a mirror.

I said, "I want to see it. I want to go there."

"Another time, maybe. Make do with this for now."

She whisked me round the exhibits, supplying her own commentary whenever she discovered the official one inadequate – which was most of the time.

"Those portals," she said. "Everybody thinks they're like some kinda giant shotgun, firing stuff at us. Should be better info here, 'cept there's not. Those are sophisticated instruments, you know? Yes indeed."

I waited for her to say more. She seemed lost in reverie a moment. Then she said, "What they are – you listen here – what they're like is valves. Or maybe, yeah, canal locks? Seen one of

them? Well, OK. They take this great – great *piece* of space, they isolate it, and they shift it. And if it happens there's a ship in it, all well and good."

"But they really look as if they shoot out – I saw this one, it went right across the sky –"

"They look like that, sure. It's in the timing."

"It was freezing afterwards. And the wind –"

"Yeah. I kinda like that, must admit." Something caught her eye; she stepped forward quickly. "Ah, look here. They got this all wrong, you know? These colours, they're just phoney. Artists' impressions, they call 'em. Lousy artists, I say."

She'd singled out a diagram displaying several planets in a system which I didn't recognise, revolving round no central sun. "The info's all available. That's what annoys me. Jesus!" She shook her head. "I need a cigarette."

I told her I did, too.

"You? You been smokin' about five minutes. Pretty quick to get a habit, eh?"

"You know," she said, "you really need to buy your own."

I nodded. I said, "I was in a hurry this morning..."

"And you didn't want Janine to catch you. Never mind."

We were seated on a bench in Central Park. In one of the blocks near the Museum lay Imogen's apartment, I knew that much. But as yet, I didn't know which one, and she didn't seem inclined to tell.

She lit up. Then she frowned. "You sure Janine's not got a hand in this?"

I told her no, again, and her frown just deepened. Then, looking at her cigarette, she said, "You know about Adrian?"

I realised it was something adult she was going to tell me, something personal. I wanted to say yes, as if nothing could surprise me; as if we were already equals. But if I did, she'd never tell. So I said, "He's your..." Boyfriend? Husband? "Partner..."

"Anything else?"

"I don't think so."

"He's from out there."

"Out..."

She gestured, a great sweep of her bony arm, as if to take in the whole universe. "Out there. *There*. I tell you something else, as well, you promise not to breathe it to a soul. Not your mom, your dad, and absolutely not Janine."

"OK..."

"Promise?"

I said I did, and she looked at me from underneath her brows, suddenly shy, hesitant, and almost girlish.

"I'm pregnant," she said then.

"Congratulations," I said, not sure it was the right thing to say. "I'm very happy for you..."

"I've been pregnant," she said, "for sixteen months. Isn't that great?"

I didn't see Imogen, or New York, for more than a year. This time, when I arrived, there was nobody to meet me. I'd left early. Run away, really. I had a suitcase full of unwashed clothes, and before risking the subway to Janine's, I found a Laundromat on 8th and washed them. My mum had taught me about always trying to look OK, even when you weren't. She did it all the time.



There was no Ken this year, with his stinking blunts and tin-foil hat. Ken was 'studying away' I was told; he was in reform school upstate. His thefts had come to light, and the meat-packing industry proved vengeful.

There was no Imogen either, at first. I went back to the Museum. I remember sitting in a video theatre there – I think I was the only occupant – watching a film about the outer worlds; not really following it so much as bathing in the colours, in the helpful and seductive voice of the narrator.

"Picture a deck of cards."

The screen showed twenty, thirty worlds, stacked on top of one another, just like playing cards; and with a magic *pling!* on the xylophone, they all fanned out, a conjuror's trick. The Earth I recognised, a blue-green jewel here among the amethysts and emeralds and rubies.

"Or a flower opening..."

*Pling!* And this time round, the stack of worlds opened like petals, an intricate, extraordinary flower, each one a different colour (though not the *right* colours, as Imogen had so pedantically explained), turning and spinning round the screen. The narrator talked of wavelengths and dimensions, but all I saw were colours: a hundred different Earths, a thousand, glistening like precious stones, separated by an octave of existence, or two octaves, or a million – I didn't much care which.

Leaving the Museum, I found a small crowd gathered on the sidewalk. A quartet of Pafiddians had landed, parked their flying gear, and were busy putting on a show. One of them had turned himself inside out, like a rubber glove; he waddled blindly, this way and that, gleaming darkly in the summer sun. His organs clung to him like offal in a butcher's shop. I thought of Ken and his job at the meat-packing factory. The remaining aliens, dressed in brightly-coloured caps, baseball jackets and jeans, were busy panhandling the crowd. Eventually a police car stopped and broke things up. They cornered the inside-out alien but couldn't work out what to charge him with. After a lot of talk he righted himself, twisting and writhing in his efforts. There was a sucking sound, then a small *plop*. He looked haggard from the strain, and his clothes were horribly stained and wrinkled. The four aliens began to argue, then regained their flying frames and sailed away across the park.

I recalled Aunt Imogen's words, the day I first arrived. Not exactly aristocracy. Not indeed.

I kept on calling Imogen. I think it was the fourth or fifth time when she answered, and even then, she was slow to pick up. An age went by, and then a harsh, ragged voice called, "Yes? Who's this?"

I wondered if she'd remember me, but she did. "Your mother kick that slob out yet?" she asked.

"Not yet," I said. "I think she's trying."

"Yeah. Not hard enough."

I suggested that we meet. She seemed reluctant, but when I told her I was in the park, she relented.

"Well, you best come fetch me then," she said.

I knew that her apartment – Adrian's apartment, as it technically was – lay on Central Park West, not far from the Museum, and I knew this was a prestigious address. But I don't think that

it struck me how prestigious till I found myself, a little nervously, telling the doorman who I'd come to see. He was a huge black guy dressed in a gold and purple uniform, like the leader of some African dictatorship. He phoned her. Again, a long wait. Then he said, "She says to go on up."

The elevator ride was smooth and quick. I was in a hallway, looking for door numbers. I tried the bell push. Waited, waited. Tried again.

"Alright, alright." I heard her voice behind the door. But it was still a minute, maybe more, before she opened it.

She had been thin when I'd first known her. Now she was skeletal, all hard edges, knobs and angles. Only her eyes seemed full of life: huge in her shrunken face, they burned like coals.

"Hey!" she cried, and flung her arms around me. "Long time no see, huh?"

I had to help her to the elevator. She linked her arm through mine for steadiness. "Sometimes, y'know, sometimes I just lose it, yeah?" She laughed, a jagged, rip-saw sound.

I was confused. "Are you alright?" I said.

"Me? Christ, never better. Let's get out of here. I need a cigarette, and Chicky's gonna go ballistic if I light up in the lobby."

"Chicky", I gathered, was the big guy in the uniform. I couldn't think of anyone less suited to the name.

Out on the street she stopped dead in the middle of the sidewalk, oblivious to passers by. She fumbled in her bag, pulled out her cigarettes. Lit one for herself and then, an afterthought, gave me one. "Still not buying 'em?"

I shrugged.

"C'mon," she said. "You be my beau."

She linked her arm in mine. But she leant on me too heavily.

Out of the corner of my eye, I glanced down at her belly, visible under the short black jacket that she wore. No pregnancy. Just flat, the fabric shrunk onto the muscles of her stomach.

"You're back," she said. "So things aren't going well?"

"They're OK. I guess."

"Ha."

"It's not that simple."

"Huh." She sniffed.

She showed me where John Lennon had been shot.

"He was standing right here," she said. "No, no –" She pulled me forward. "Here." She turned around. "And Chapman comes up – just along by here. Says something, he wants – I dunno, an autograph, I think." With her free hand, she reached out as if to sign. "Then, *bam!*" Her arm clenched. "He went down. Oh, Jesus..." She shook her head. "That's it, you know? A whole life, blown away. Like that."

We walked on. It struck me I'd no notion of her age; I imagined her, perhaps a very young girl, witnessing the scene.

"You saw...?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah. Not every time. But some days, when I come by here... It breaks me up. Not 'cause he's famous, not that, just... seeing a man shot down that way. It's wrong. It's all wrong. You'd think you'd just get used to it, but...hell. You never do."

We stood at the crossing on Central Park West, waiting for the lights. She was impatient, shuffling her feet, doing an awkward little dance. She leaned upon my arm.

"This city got so slow. Jesus!" She laughed, or cackled anyway. "Pretty good, huh? Too fast for New York. That's me. Too fast



for old New York!"

She showed me Strawberry Fields. Later we found a bench, and sat, and smoked more cigarettes.

"You think I'm crazy, huh? You think your old aunt's crazy, do you?"

My instinct was to tell her no, of course not – I knew that trouble came from disagreeing with grown-ups. But this was Imogen, and I guessed she wanted honesty. I said, "Well..."

"Well..." she mimicked.

Neither of us spoke again for some time.

"One thing I'll say for you," she told me. "You weren't bothered. When you knew. 'Bout Adrian. It never worried you, that right?"

I shrugged.

"Pretty unique," she said. "Pretty unique."

I said, "I'd like to meet him."

It was a sensible thing to say, a grown-up thing; only the instant it was out my mouth I thought, oh, no, no, I don't want to meet him at all! And I thought of the alien at the Museum, turned inside out, and it seemed that Adrian, closeted away, could only be still more bizarre. But Imogen reached out and took my hand.

"Good boy," she said.

"So..." I wanted her to change her mind. "So, it's possible? I could..."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Up to him."

A new thought struck me. "Was he there? When I called?"

"Oh yeah. He doesn't, you know, he doesn't socialise a lot."

"He's ten foot tall and smells of fish."

"Ha! No, he doesn't smell. But he stays home, and... Well, I guess I do too, these days. We're kind of private." She blew smoke into the hot, moist air. "Tell the truth, I don't much miss coming out. When I was a kid... I spent a lot of time, places like this. Just on my own. Sitting. Watching everybody else have fun. That's what I remember most. Like everybody else – the other families, their friends, just about everyone. They all had fun."

She briefly caught my eye, then looked away again. "We're two of a kind, you know, you and me. Our shitty homes, our shitty moms and dads... The great unloved. That's us. But, hey – we make up for it, don't we? We sure as hell make up for it."

"I'm not –" I said, but got no further. I wanted to protest, but didn't want to break the spell by disagreeing; and deep down, too, I feared she might be right.

"It's here. It's right inside me."

"You don't... you don't look..."

"Hey. You think I swell up like a fucking zeppelin?" She tapped her brow. "I swell up here. That's where. Up *here*."

"Is there – ? I mean, what's the – ?" The word 'gestation' came to me. "What's the gestation time?"

"You're talking like a doctor. Maybe that's your calling. I don't know. But she's getting stronger. Much, much stronger."

"It's a girl?"

"Oh, yes, it's a girl. It's definitely a girl." She smiled at me, shy all at once. "It's me, you see. I'm carrying myself."

"They tell you that it's linear. Time's arrow, all that shit. It's not. It's like a sea. Currents and eddies, movements – ah." She looked

around. "I just forgot what it was like out here. It's getting stronger all the time. So much to see, so much... You ever think about umbrellas?"

"Not a whole lot."

"Oh, you should! You've no idea the way they stand out. Umbrellas, parasols... Sometimes a big shape, I see it there, just, y'know, bouncing along, maybe white or red or green – it's an umbrella someone carried maybe ten, or twenty, or a hundred years ago. And I can see it! And the Macy's floats – you just wouldn't believe! They're like –" She squinted up her eyes, peered back towards the road. "They're like a fleet of warplanes, heading for Columbus Circle. I can almost make 'em out – just the shadows left, just kind of gleaming on the air..."

She held my hand. Her fingers were like dry twigs. I said, "Aunt Imogen... I don't want to be rude, but are you on something?"

She laughed. "Sweetheart, there's no drug in the world that can do this. No pill, no smoke, no powder. I see it all. It's like I'm walking through a tide, some days. I'm tuned to it, and that's what's happening. I can see everything. Everything here leaves a mark. I see the sun, the moon. The stars. The corner of the circle. It's all there. It doesn't go away. But you gotta be on the wavelength, yeah? That's all."

She jabbed me with her elbow. "Hey now. Help your old aunt back inside, huh? 'Fore we freeze to death."

It was a hot, sultry day. But I didn't argue; I helped her to her feet, and we retraced our steps. At times I glanced at her, trying to read her face, to guess what she was seeing. But there was no sign it was any different from what I was seeing too.

The apartment wasn't large. It had one big room that looked across the park (and the cost of such a view, financially, was something that had still not fully registered with me). It was almost Spartan in its décor. She shuffled round, made coffee for us both. We sat on simple armchairs, and she talked a little more, about how good she felt, how well her life was going; how horrible her childhood had been, and how glad she was that it was gone. I hardly listened now. After a time, I asked to use the bathroom. She pointed the direction with a claw-like hand. On my way, I glanced into a side room, surprised to see it packed with clothes and books, a double bed crammed in a tiny, overcrowded space. It was, despite the clutter, a very feminine room, as if all Imogen's personal belongings had been jammed inside, leaving the rest of the apartment free for...what? The main room had no personality, no stamp on it. It was like a room where no one lived.

I found the bathroom, locked the door. The mirrors here were tinted gold. There was a single electric toothbrush. I searched the wall cabinet, looking for – well, I didn't know what. Exotic prescription drugs, hypodermics, wraps, chillums, crack pipes... Found nothing worse than shower gel, mouthwash and shampoos. I urinated, washed my hands. Then, as I dried them on the single towel, I happened to glance up, into the gold-tinted mirror fixed onto the wall.

It seemed that something swam there, moving, purposeful; something that was not quite my reflection, and yet overlay it, like a shadow or a ghost image. I seemed to see a face, watching me, perhaps evaluating me; I imagined someone male, middle aged, with shaven head and sharp, piercing eyes. Then all at



once it shimmered, shrank into the depths again. I blinked. I raised my hand. The figure in the mirror raised a hand. I could see nothing, nothing but myself.

The tap was running still. I turned it off. Took one last look into the mirror as I left.

But it was ordinary. Normal. What else should it be?

I told Imogen that I was sorry, but I'd have to go. I'd told Janine I'd do some grocery shopping for her, and I couldn't be late home.

"Get cold, you got out now," she said.

"It's roasting out there."

"Is now. But there's a big ship on the way. You know what happens then."

I almost told her, no one can predict the ships. But I didn't. Instead I hugged her, and said I'd see her soon, and let myself out, anxious to be gone. All the way down in the elevator I twitched, I tapped my fingers, I could not keep still. I pushed out through the lobby doors. A cold wind bit into my face.

I didn't go back to Janine's. I couldn't take in what had happened, what I'd been told; I couldn't rationalise it. I bought cigarettes. I crossed the street, into the park. The park was like a wedding cake, all white icing; slowly it melted, dripping from the trees, steaming on the paths. I smoked. I walked – quickly, hurriedly, but going nowhere. Every now and then I looked back, at the buildings along Central Park West, at what must have been Imogen's apartment windows, wondering if she could see me (though, even with the skills she'd boasted of, I hardly thought that likely). Aunt Imogen, I wanted to cry out, Aunt Imogen, Aunt Imogen!

Movement took the place of thought. I wanted to be gone from people, to be private, have time to myself. But I was in New York.

I found my way into the Ramble, and among the streams, hillocks and woodlands, I left the path and found a boulder to sit down on, watching the river, watching – between the leaves – those windows, high up, and now far away.

I don't know how long I'd been sitting there. It must have been a while, because I remember I was on my next-to-last cigarette. I heard something behind me, turned. A young man was approaching. He wore a white T-shirt, and the muscles of his torso stood out like an anatomy diagram. His jeans belt bore a large, metal eagle. But his manner was gentle; he held a pack of cigarettes towards me. "Pardon me, sir – do you have...?" He mimed flicking a lighter.

I didn't speak, but I felt in my pocket for the lighter I'd just bought.

"Quite a day, huh? You know this was all snow an hour back? You see that?"

I nodded.

"That's something, hey? Oh yeah."

He sat beside me; it seemed natural. We smoked together, and we talked. He didn't make a move on me, not for a long time. And I wanted to talk; I didn't tell him about Imogen, but I talked about my parents, their on-and-off divorce, why I was staying in the city – and he listened. And he talked some more about the ship that had just passed, and asked me what I thought of it, and I told him that the whole thing – the aliens, the ships, the

way the city had been filled with strange, exciting things – both thrilled and scared me more than I could ever say.

"Hey," he said. "You don't need be scared."

He was touching my leg, touching it to emphasise this point and that, but I was passive; I liked the attention, I suppose. I *wanted* the attention. It seemed I'd had so little, with the way things were at home, the way things were now here, as well. Everyone I knew had something else to think about, everyone's lives turned around something I could not gain access to. I felt betrayed, and sad; an emptiness inside me. And I let him talk, and tell me how the aliens had first come to the city, and the world. And then he said, "You wanna see something?"

He was watching me from underneath his brows.

"I don't know," I said.

A smile had formed upon his lips; a knowing little smile, and it got wider all the time.

"You wanna see," he said, and now the smile was so wide that I wasn't sure how he could fit it on his face, it turned into a grin, and it went back and back, it ran from ear to ear, and then the upper portion of his head just seemed to lift up as if on a hinge, and his mouth opened, except it wasn't just a mouth now, it was a tunnel, ribbed and crimson-coloured, and a long, bifurcate tongue flicked out and quivered at my cheek, a little velvet whip...

I stood up quickly. I muttered some sort of apology – I used the word 'mistake', possibly more than once – and walked as fast as I could, out of the Ramble, out of the park, and I didn't stop till I was at Times Square, exhausted, shaking, and I bought more cigarettes. Then I stood there, safe in the crowd, and smoked them one by one till they were gone.

My mum was on her own when I got home. That's if you didn't count the vodka bottle tucked down by her chair, but that was mostly empty anyhow.

"He's gone," she said. "Now it's just you and me."

But in my heart I was already gone as well. I didn't tell her that. Her eye was swollen shut, purple with bruising.

"Bastard," she said.

There were bottles hidden all over the house; I'd find them, searching for shampoo, or for a clean shirt, or for a pack of noodles for my breakfast.

It looked as if she'd bought out the whole liquor store.

Janine phoned in November. Imogen was dead, she said. The building staff had started knocking on her door each day to check she was OK. When she didn't answer, they called the cops, and used a pass key to get in. She'd gotten out of bed that morning, made it to the bathroom, collapsed and died.

"She wasn't really family," my mum said, as if to soothe the blow. "Not blood, anyhow."

By summer, I was living in New York. Not at Janine's this time; I took a string of cheap rooms, most of which I left before the rent came due. The heat was stifling. Some days I lay in bed, unable to get up. I'd made the great escape, the exile I'd been planning on for years. What I couldn't do was find my next move.

There came a time I walked past Imogen's old building. Chicky, the doorman, was still there. I introduced myself. He looked blank at me until I dropped her name. Then he raised one finger,



pointed like a gun. "Remember you," he said. "She didn't get a lot of visitors, so I guess they kind of linger in the mind."

He reminisced. I'd imagined that she'd be a dragon, a scourge of servants and functionaries, but the doorman's memories were different. He'd found her polite, and even kindly. "She never gave a shit how much you earned or what your job was," he said. "Thing with her, what she couldn't stand – she couldn't stand for fools."

"That sounds like her," I said, and lit another cigarette.

He asked me if I'd like to visit her apartment. "No one living there," he said. "Rent's still being paid, though, so..." He shrugged. One more little mystery. "I guess they'll clear it out eventually."

He called one of the janitors, a thin man with his front teeth missing. He smiled – a black wedge of a smile – and shook my hand. He smelled of oil and grease. "Leon," he introduced himself. I wondered what it must be like, doing his job. I was out of work again, but I'd hinted to the doorman that I worked in the financial district. My clothes were fairly good; I reckoned I could pass as affluent. Respectable, at least.

So I rode with Leon in the elevator, trying to make out I was accustomed to such favours.

Leon said, "He tell you? It was me that found her."

He sorted through a bunch of keys so big they might have come from Sing Sing. "Yep," he said. "Second time we had a tenant pass on. Both times, it's me they send in, take a look. You believe that? Both times." He turned the lock.

"Tell me about it."

"Sure you wanna know?"

The door opened. There was a faint smell – nothing unpleasant, just stale air, a smell of stillness, if there's such a thing.

"Yeah. I want to know it all." I stepped across the threshold. "You know what she was like. She wouldn't want the Disney version."

The place had hardly changed. The two big rooms, almost empty, the bedroom packed with clothes and books; but there was dust on it all now. A thin grey fur clung to her computer screen. The shelves were thick with it.

"She was just sitting there. In the john. Heart gave out, I guess. Ah, shit. I tell you – there was nothin' to her in those last few weeks. Nothin'. I mean, like, she was never chunky anyhow, but she just dropped to skin and bone. Used to amaze me she kept goin' like she did. But that's the way it always goes, I guess, when you got – you know."

"What?" I said. "Got what?"

He gave me a sideways look. "You didn't know? The Big C. Bastard of a thing. Had a cousin go like that. Just ate right through him. So I knew it, when I saw her..."

"She had cancer?"

He nodded, suddenly awkward, like he'd said too much.

I went over to the window, mostly to keep my face away from him. The park was green. I could see children in the play area, traffic moving right below, but it was silent, like an old newsreel.

Was it cancer? The weight loss? The talk of pregnancy? Was that just fantasy, some kind of compensation, when all that she was incubating really was a tumour?

I said to Leon, "Scuse me," and I went into the bathroom, locked the door.

The soft gold light touched dusty bottles, a mug, the one electric toothbrush on its mount. I looked into the mirror. I could see I was about to cry; I watched myself as if I were a stranger, how my mouth crinkled, shook, and a single tear dribbled down the side of my nose. I shivered. Then the moment passed.

I flushed the toilet bowl. I ran the water in the sink, and washed my face. I looked into the mirror once again. Saw no one there but me.

When I came out, Leon was standing where I'd left him, in the centre of the big lounge with the wooden floor.

"You OK?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine."

"Anything you wanna do? I gotta stay with you – it's regulations, but, y'know, you want some time...?"

"I'm alright. One last look round...?"

"Sure, sure."

But there was nothing much to look at. I found some CDs on the floor: Messiaen, John Adams, Blondie. I picked them up and placed them on the rack. In the tiny kitchen, I found a bottle of Sauvignon, years old, a rack of saucepans, kitchen knives... Desultory, I opened all the drawers, like an overnight guest trying to make breakfast without waking his host.

And that was when it happened.

Her kitchen window looked out on a blank stone wall, a well sunk through the building. It was dark and shadowy, even in daylight, and I could see myself reflected there, the movement of my shoulder as I shut the drawer, the down-turn of my mouth.

Someone was standing in the space behind me, just over to the side, next to the microwave.

I saw the dark sweep of her hair. The black shape of a T-shirt, or perhaps a dress.

I didn't turn. I said her name – barely a whisper – and in the mirror of the window, her lips curved in the slightest smile.

She winked at me. She did it slowly, slowly – squeezed her eyelid shut and opened it again.

I spun around, already wondering what to say, how to explain my presence here, in her private rooms, her inner sanctum; wondering how to talk to someone I'd imagined dead.

But the room was empty. And when I looked back at the window, there was only me, my mouth open, my right hand frozen in mid-air, still reaching out to greet her.

I told Leon, "Alright. I'm ready now. Let's go."

The next ship came in two days later. I crunched across the ice crystals in Astor Place, and shivered in my thin shirt.

I lit a cigarette.

It was a habit, but one she'd started; and I lit it, like a candle, to my memory of her. ❧

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Tim Lees writes: Nostalgia time. This story came to me a few years back, on July 4th, while wandering around the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The whole town was in holiday mood; in Alphabet City, there were barbecues out on the streets. We watched a soccer match, walked to a bar, drank lots of margaritas, and the bar staff, perhaps catching an English accent, played non-stop Beatles albums – a band I seldom listen to at home but whose brilliance just seemed to grow with every sip. In the meantime, from stray remarks, odd thoughts and random happenings, 'The Corner of the Circle' slowly came together in my mind, with almost no effort (writing it, however, was another matter). There's a popular idea that happiness and creativity are incompatible. It's nice to see it proved wrong once in a while.



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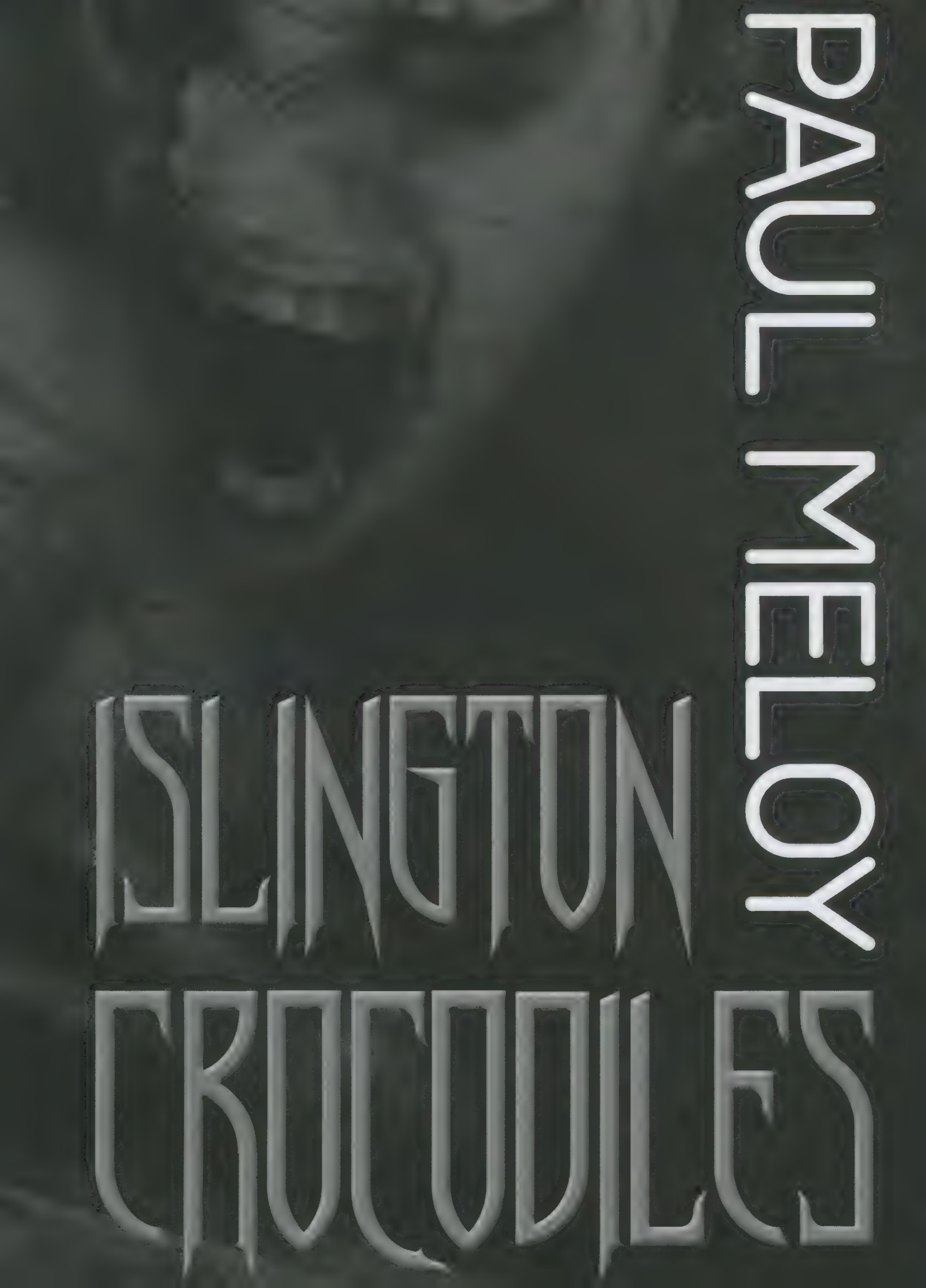
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# Reviews

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Photograph of Gareth L. Powell courtesy of Carl Newland  
The Last Reef cover art by Fran Cantrell (pyxelated.deviantart.com)





## Book Zone Book Reviews

**THE LAST REEF AND OTHER STORIES****Gareth L. Powell**

Elastic Press pb, 200pp, £5.99

**Review + interview by Paul F. Cockburn**

The internet is changing the face of science fiction publishing, with there already being an amazing plethora of online fiction magazines. Just like their pulped paper forebears, a small number of increasingly respected titles are giving a new generation of science fiction writers fresh opportunities to grow and mature and – most importantly – get their stories noticed. Gareth L. Powell is one such writer, although he has also sold a few stories to this very magazine – his ‘Ack-Ack Macaque’ making a big splash back in issue 212 (September/October 2007). Now, fifteen of Powell’s stories have been brought together in *The Last Reef*, giving readers the opportunity for a sustained voyage through a surprisingly diverse range of imaginative and entrancing worlds.

Powell is certainly no one trick pony; his stories are spread across time and space, from present day alien incursions to almost literally the end of the universe. That said, bringing these stories together does allow you to see the commonalities between them; not just the obvious reiterations of characters, organisations and environments, but in frequently recurring imagery and metaphors. More than once you’ll find characters in darkened rooms, illuminated by outside worlds they’re attempting to avoid. Water – be it in the form of the sea,



a lake or rain – becomes a transforming element, sometimes literally. And, at the heart of most of Powell’s stories, you will find male characters teetering on the brink of decisions or actions they don’t want to take, and yet ultimately forced onwards by strong female characters who irresistibly pull them into new worlds or conditions.

Admittedly, gathering the stories together like this also shows how Powell’s writing isn’t necessarily the most poetically memorable around; that said, his prose is succinct and far more meticulously constructed and developed than might first appear. Without question, what all the stories definitely do have in common is a memorable quality – you’ll be thinking about them for a long time afterwards. These are stories that engage both the heart and the brain, proof positive that online publishing is not all bad and that Elastic Press has performed a public service in collecting them together.

**How does it feel to see your stories gathered together in a printed collection?**

I’m extremely proud of this collection. It represents one of the busiest periods of my life: five years in which I got married, became a father of two, worked my ass off at a full-time job, gained a qualification in marketing, and still somehow found the time to write!

**Is the growing acceptance of web-based fiction magazines a good thing?**

For writers, online publication offers instant feedback. Most webzines have their own discussion forums where readers

can offer their opinions and debate the relative merits of each story, and getting feedback this way can be a useful learning experience. However, you have to make sure you only submit your very best work because many of those websites will still be online in five or ten years’ time, and you don’t want to be continually embarrassed by a sub-standard story that just won’t go away.

**Do you enjoy writing short stories, or are they just a step towards longer work?**

Short stories let you experiment with style and setting, to try out different ways of writing in order to find your own voice before you embark on a longer work. They also give you the chance to build up your reputation and make contacts within the industry – contacts that will prove very useful when you’re trying to sell your first novel. That said, I still love reading and writing them for their own sake, and will continue to do so. There are some stories that can only be told in the short form, and for me short stories – and magazines, like *Interzone*, that publish them – have always been at the heart of the science fiction genre, much more so than in so-called mainstream literature.

**SF is sometimes derided for making ‘the idea’ the ‘hero’. Your own stories invariably turn on human relationships, so what attracts you to write SF?**

To be honest, I can’t remember a time when I didn’t want to write SF. I grew up with it, and remember Apollo 18 docking with a Russian Soyuz module when I was four years old. SF has always been about what it means to be human in an increasingly strange and baffling world. My job as a science fiction writer is to examine how technologies are changing the ways in which we interact with each other, and I believe the best way to do that is through the eyes of flawed and sympathetic characters in believable relationships.

**Your first novel, *Silversands*, will be published next year. How did you find working on a larger scale?**

Actually, I wrote the first draft of the novel before I wrote the majority of the stories in *The Last Reef*, and then went back and rewrote it using what I’d learned while writing them. At around 50,000 words, it’s a relatively short novel, but I’m very proud of it and – like the stories in *The Last Reef* – I put a lot of myself into it.





### AN EVIL GUEST

Gene Wolfe

Tor hb, 304pp, \$25.95

Reviewed by Mike Cobley

Funny thing, description. Too much of it and the prose turns into a kind of marzipan of words that slows the narrative pace to a rainbow stumble. Too little, and it's like staring at stick figures animated on a white background. Then there's the description publishers employ to prepare readers for what's actually inside, and I know it's unfair to review a cover blurb before the book, but heck I'm gonna do it.

*An Evil Guest* is described on the back cover (of the advance uncorrected proof) as "Lovecraft meets Blade Runner," and a "supernatural horror novel with a '30s noir atmosphere." When I read that I thought oh yeah, sounds like a blast, just my cuppa rocket fuel. Then I read it.

Hmm. Methinks that Tor's publicity department was being creative, to put it mildly. Lovecraft meets Blade Runner? Tosh. Squamously eldritch, madness-inducing creatures are, I'm sad to say, somewhat thin on the ground here, and angst-ridden cops hunting lifetime-limited androids were conspicuous by their absence. So was it supernatural horror with a 1930s noir ambience? Not so that you'd notice. This novel has a stripped-bare feel to it, with no attempt to use visceral description to evoke setting and atmosphere. *An Evil Guest* is set in the late 21st century but the senses are so starved of

evocation that I've no idea what the period looks, feels or even smells like.

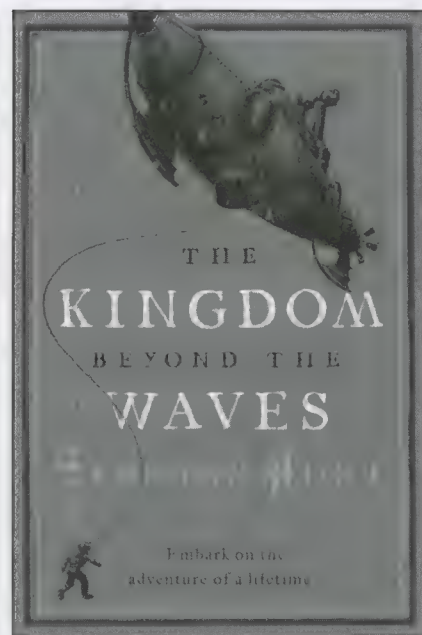
So all I'm left with are the words, a great deal of which consists of dialogue, and this is where the '30s noir connotation has been shoehorned in. *An Evil Guest* reminds me of Chandler's prose, spare and transparent, efficiently providing a framework for his characters to engage in their intrigues. But the characters that Wolfe employs here are not Chanderlesque, rather they seem lightweight and indistinct. The story is seen from the viewpoint of Cassie Casey, an actress in a show called 'The Red Spot', which is about to finish its run at the start of the book. She is contacted by Gideon Chase, who is a rich, Heinleinesque troubleshooter investigating another rich, powerful man called Bill Reis, a former ambassador to an alien civilisation on a world called Woldercan. The bulk of the book deals with how Reis persuades Cassie to sign on to a big musical floorshow called 'Dating The Volcano God', how other actors and actresses become involved, how Cassie becomes romantically involved with first Gideon Chase then Bill Reis, and eventually ends up on a south sea island

**"An Evil Guest isn't so much Bogart and Bacall on a monochrome, rainswept street at night, as Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn on the set of Some Like It Hot"**

where she becomes High Queen.

But the book begins with Gideon Chase meeting the President who wants him to investigate Bill Reis, who apparently has been carrying out faultless, undetectable espionage against secure government laboratories. Yet this opening plot driver soon fades away in the ensuing convolutions of assembling the cast for 'Dating The Volcano God'; it seems to have no connection with the rest of the book and Gideon Chase, who is front and centre at the start, is barely present at the end.

'30s noir atmosphere? No. *An Evil Guest* isn't so much Bogart and Bacall on a monochrome, rainswept street at night, as Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn on the set of *Some Like It Hot* (with the ending of *The Wicker Man* tacked onto the end). As I said at the start, too little description can deprive a story of readerly enjoyments, whereas misleading description is just plain dishonest. If Gene Wolfe really had written a Lovecraft/noir crossover novel it could have been brilliant, but this just comes over as inconsequential.



### THE KINGDOM BEYOND THE WAVES

Stephen Hunt

HarperVoyager hb, 650 pp, £17.99

Reviewed by Lawrence Osborn

*The Kingdom Beyond the Waves* opens with the central character, Amelia Harsh, engaging in an Indiana Jones style piece of tomb robbery. She is an archaeologist obsessed with discovering the legendary city of Camlantis (once the utopian home of a race of pacifists) and she hopes the tomb will furnish evidence for her theories. Barely escaping with her life, Amelia returns empty-handed to the Kingdom of Jackals only to discover that she has been dismissed from her college post. However, the mysterious philanthropist Abraham Quest offers to fund an expedition to locate Camlantis. Although she blames him for her father's bankruptcy and subsequent suicide, Amelia accepts his offer.

Amelia's search for the key to the location of Camlantis takes her by submarine into the dark heart of the continent of Liongeli. On their way to the submerged ruins that contain the key, she and her companions (a motley crew of ex-convicts and Quest's female mercenaries, with a half-demented steamman as their guide) have to face a mind-boggling array of threats. However, she succeeds in finding the key, and the search for Camlantis can really begin.

Amelia and Quest both hope that the discovery of Camlantis will usher in a new utopian age. But they have very different



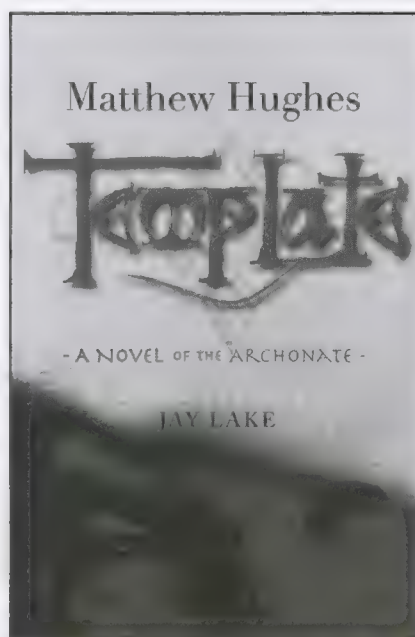
visions of how that is to be achieved, and one of those visions could be very bad news for those condemned to live in the present age. The stage is set for a climactic confrontation.

To say that this book is action packed is almost an understatement. There is something unrelenting about the intensity of the frequency with which dramatic moments arise. In keeping with the ripping yarn levels of action, the characters in the book are generally larger than life. In Amelia's case, this is literally so: she has been magically enhanced into a cross between Lara Croft and a Soviet-era woman shot-putter. Abraham Quest combines the genius of an Einstein with the entrepreneurship of a Bill Gates.

But I think my personal favourite is Cornelius Fortune: a shape-shifter who uses his powers to free political prisoners from the clutches of a crazed revolutionary regime. While Hunt's characters tend to be larger than life, they are also all flawed in some way: Amelia's obsession with Camlantis, Commander Black's selfishness, Cornelius Fortune's inner demons, Abraham Quest's fanaticism. His is very much a postmodern take on heroism. Perhaps in keeping with their larger-than-life nature, his characters are generally interesting and engaging but none of them is particularly deep or complex. The complexity in this novel definitely lies in the action and plotting rather than the characterization.

My first reading of *The Kingdom Beyond the Waves* managed to turn several hours in the departure lounge at Stansted Airport and a flight with Ryanair into enjoyable experiences! But what for me lifted this book above the level of airport escapism was Hunt's vivid descriptions allied with a strong vein of anarchic imagination reminiscent of China Miéville at his best. Hunt has created some remarkable characters and races, from craynarbians (a race of crab-like humanoids) to the lashlites (a race of flying lizard-like beings with remarkable powers of prophecy), and set them in a world of remarkable natural phenomena, such as the floatquake (in which large tracts of land occasionally break off and float away).

*The Kingdom Beyond the Waves* has no literary pretensions. It is quite simply a wonderful escapist yarn with some nice satirical touches and a mass of literary and media allusions to tease the reader. Definitely a book to take with you on a long flight.



#### TEMPLATE

Matthew Hughes

PS Publishing hb, 253pp £20

#### Reviewed by Ian Sales

Comparisons between Matthew Hughes and Jack Vance are inevitable, because if any writer is a template for Hughes' fiction then it is Vance. Hughes' Archonate novels are set on an Earth not unlike the Dying Earth, or on the worlds of a formless galactic polity called The Spray which resembles the Alastor Cluster (in fact, *hussade*, from Vance's *Trullion: Alastor* 2262, is mentioned in *Template*).

Like many of Vance's novels, *Template* is a *bildungsroman*, and one in which the protagonist is involuntarily pitched into a quest for his true identity. Said protagonist is Conn Labro, a highly-skilled and indentured duellist on the world of Thrais. Despite his abilities, Labro is a naïf and Thrais, with its culture based on contracts and transactions, has given him poor social skills. So when a regular customer is murdered, leaves him a fortune and an encrypted bearer deed to a planet, and an attempt is made on his own life, Labro has no idea how to respond. Happily, there is a young woman at hand to help him. Labro buys out his indenture and determines to discover his origin and the location of the planet he apparently now owns. The young woman, Jenore Mordene, he 'hires' as a guide.

It's in the nature of such a story's template that the naïf's voyage of discovery

is as much literal as it is metaphorical. Labro's bearer deed has determined his destination, Earth, and so he must travel there. En route, he learns something of The Spray – which gives Hughes opportunity to discourse on various cultural templates for societies. For example, one character posits a theory of societies each built upon one of the seven deadly sins. Thrais, with its 'transactionalism', is of course Greed. Unfortunately, Hughes makes little of this idea, using it merely as the topic of conversation.

On Earth, Labro sees all social interactions as a form of transaction. Mordene, however, is from a region of Earth which eschews money, and sees something different. This provides some interesting repartee, but does not advance the plot as such. But it certainly sets the template for their relationship.

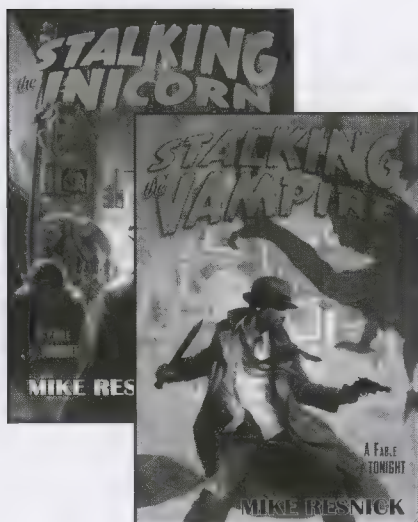
It's only when Labro learns what he has inherited that the villain of the piece steps in to the story. Now the template is Gothic. Not only does the villain remain masked but, as is often the case in such fictions, there is a greater enemy hiding behind him. And this greater villain must

**"At some point reading *Template*, everyone is sure to ask why we need Hughes when we have Vance. And the answer is: because we can never have too much Vance"**

be defeated if Labro is to win and keep knowledge of his origin, his legacy, and the girl. And yes, the book's climax does reveal Labro's origin. It also explains the story's title – there is indeed a very real template in the story.

At some point reading *Template*, everyone is sure to ask why we need Hughes when we have Vance. And the answer is: because we can never have too much Vance. And providing it's done with invention and wit, then it's as enjoyable as the real thing. Happily, Hughes matches the wit and invention of Vance. He also brings slightly off-kilter philosophical musings to his stories, and they provide a depth Vance sometimes lacks. Having said that, the writing in *Template* is a little stilted. While clearly intentional, it's not entirely successful. Further, Labro is somewhat stiff a character, and Mordene is under-written. Neither characteristic is unexpected – at that intersection of *bildungsroman* and travelogue, where both protagonist and world are mapped, there's little room for immersion.





**STALKING THE UNICORN**  
**STALKING THE VAMPIRE**  
**Mike Resnick**

Pyr pb, 310pp, \$15/Pyr hb, 288pp, \$25

Reviewed by Juliet McKenna

The rapid proliferation of urban fantasy has established a template that many authors use very effectively, others less successfully. But *Stalking the Unicorn* was first published in 1987. Will it stand comparison or merely reveal the roots of this sub-genre, lacking the nuance and complexity of the current best?

Initially it doesn't read like fantasy at all. John Justin Mallory is a New York private eye in the Raymond Chandler tradition, drinking hard on a solitary New Year's Eve. A fan of hard-boiled crime novels, I'm wary lest talent for pastiche is disguising fundamental lack of plot and character. Happily Resnick's affection and respect for classic *noir* fiction soon shows, as he infuses that tradition's template with fantasy's freshness. Fluent writing, notably the dialogue, establishes Mallory as an engaging protagonist, deftly slips in his history and convinces us taking a desperate elf's commission to find a missing unicorn before daybreak is his best course of action.

Mürgenstürm is small, green and a world away from more elegant elves infesting fantasy. His world is the other Manhattan glimpsed from the corner of the eye. After a subway journey down unexpected paths, Mallory finds a city tipping its hat to the literary tradition of looking-glass worlds and to our own reality. There's a weird coherence to everything that nearly makes sense. But not quite. Mallory faces as many dangers in this Manhattan, just from

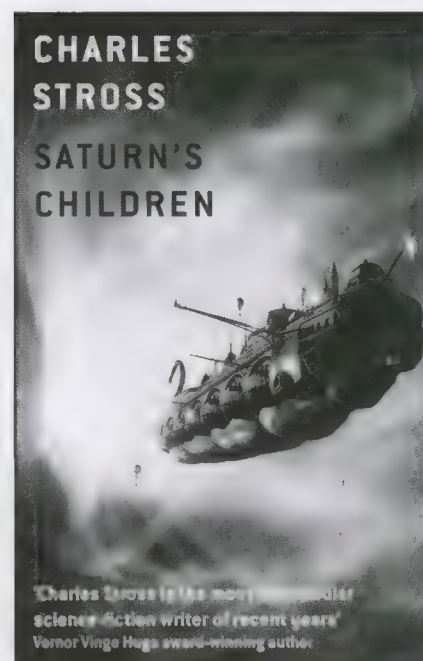
different origins, as Resnick displays an instinct for humorous writing that leaves the reader strangely uneasy.

An author could easily focus on the comedic, with Mallory reacting to absurdities as comment on the irrationality of our own world. Such writing can be entertaining and Resnick's reflections through fantasy's magic mirror are very funny. But Mallory's an active hero, making for a much better story. He discovers Mürgenstürm is far from the hapless unfortunate he claims to be. The Grundy is a demon who's after the unicorn and whether his magic is science or semantics, it's still deadly. As word spreads that Mallory's opposing him, this Manhattan's denizens run for cover. That only makes Mallory more determined, now hunting the devious leprechaun, Flypaper Gillespie with the debatable help of Mürgenstürm and Felina the cat girl, only one of many winning characters adding depth to Resnick's creation.

New Year's Day dawns after twists and turns, fairytale encounters and a few dead bodies. The story ends in the best folklore tradition, not necessarily happily but thoroughly satisfactorily.

In *Stalking the Vampire* can Resnick return to this other Manhattan without merely retracing the same dark streets? Initial signs are encouraging. The plot's under way at once. Also, given this second book is written twenty years later, the consistency of style is impressive. Mallory's partner Colonel Carruthers and Felina return as fresh as ever.

That's Winnifred Carruthers, famed hunter of gorgons, chimeras and such, and supplier of office doilies and teapots. On All Hallows Eve, her nephew Rupert vanishes, soon after Mallory discovers he's been bitten by a vampire. Felina and Mallory team up with Bats McGuire, a reluctant, middle-aged, unemployed vampire. Searching Creepy Conrad's All-Night Mortuary, the Vampire State Building and Madison Round Garden, they're joined by the amiable dragon Nathan Botts, who'd much rather be Scaly Jim Chandler, creator of hard-boiled detective Wings O'Bannon. They're soon chasing Vlad Drachma, who's readying his getaway. The clock's ticking. Can even the devious Mallory frustrate him, when every time he thinks he's got the hang of this Manhattan, something unexpected crops up? With affectionate riffs on vampires, romance, fantasy and crime fiction, Resnick crafts another funny, inventive, distinctive and sneakily surprising tale. More, please!



**SATURN'S CHILDREN**  
**Charles Stross**

Orbit hb, 400pp, £15.99

Review + interview by Rick Kleffel

Humanity may be long dead, but our robot slaves live on. In *Saturn's Children*, Charles Stross takes a new bead on artificial intelligence and offers readers a more old-fashioned story. Two hundred years after the extinction of the human race, Freya Nakamichi-47, a femmefbot without purpose and down on her luck, takes on what seems to be a fairly simple and lucrative job. Of course it proves to be nothing of the kind, and before readers can wonder where the Singularity went, Stross has whisked Freya into a well-written and imaginatively conceived space adventure. *Saturn's Children* may eschew the Singularity, but Stross remains unconstrained by conventional science fiction scenarios.

*Saturn's Children* is told from Freya's perspective, and Stross makes full use of the AI storytelling toolkit, popping in new identities on a chip to provide flashbacks and plot twists. But Stross loves his adventure-story tropes as well, so expect the Perils of Pauline in a train track scene re-imagined in a spectacularly described colony on Mercury. The novel is loaded with sexual imagery, matched by unfettered and entertaining technological speculation. It's a bit dense, but most readers will find it enjoyably so, since Stross has a wonderful





flair for humour. Stross is a strong prose writer, peppering his work with poetic neologisms. For all the fun to be had, there are some intense undercurrents of speculation about free will and slavery. These children are not what the grown-ups who beget them will expect; neither is this novel.

**Your new novel opens with a dedication to Isaac Asimov and Robert Heinlein. Could you tell us how first found each author, the influence they've played in your past work and the influence they bear on *Saturn's Children*?**

Actually, neither of them have directly influenced my past work other than indirectly (insofar as Asimov and Heinlein were two of the most influential SF writers from the 1930s–1960s, and in Heinlein's case, somewhat later). Asimov was certainly notable among the golden age writers for his application of rigorous logic to situations he'd set up, but he was by no means a literary stylist to look up to (and I should note that in his later years he focused on science writing rather than fiction). Heinlein, in contrast, brought story-telling skills to a field that was dismally short of them in the late 1930s, and continued to change his outlook and techniques as the times moved on – it's probably not unfair to call him the David Bowie of SF.

Obviously, I read them voraciously in my youth. (The golden age of science fiction is twelve, as they say.) But to the

extent that literary technique has become more important to SF, neither of them are what you might call a suitable model of emulation today; they laid out the town boundaries sixty years ago, but since then it's been built over to such an extent that the original design is unrecognisable.

**You're noted for being one of the primary fictional visionaries of the Singularity. How did you manage to bypass it in *Saturn's Children*?**

I'm not particularly happy about being labelled Mr Singularity; I've written just one Singularity book (*Accelerando*) and had another book retitled by the publisher (*Singularity Sky*) to ride a perceived bandwagon. So bypassing it in *Saturn's Children* wasn't exactly hard – any more than it was in *Halting State*, or the *Merchant Princes* books.

Having said that, the central conceit of *Saturn's Children* – humanoid robots with human-like temperaments – is a fairly logical side-effect if you posit that we can build computers that emulate the neural networks of the human brain. It's a neat side-step around the idea of artificial

**"The idea of unmodified humans settling other planets is right up there with heavier-than-air flight: we don't have wings, so we're going to have to develop some pretty exotic technologies before it's possible"**

intelligence designed from the bottom-up, insofar as it doesn't require breakthroughs in cognitive and computer science; it just needs more of stuff we're already doing, such as IBM's Blue Brain program.

**This novel is primarily told from the perspective of a sophisticated robot, and you make use of this fact to create some equally sophisticated storytelling tools. Science fiction expands the storyteller's toolkit.**

Well...in the case of *Saturn's Children*, an explicit homage to Robert Heinlein in his late period, I was just using tools from his box: as Alexei Panshin points out in *Heinlein in Dimension*: "Heinlein quickly dismisses the gadget story and limits himself to stories about people. He says that there are three kinds: boy-meets-girl, The Little Tailor, and the man-who-learned-better. He then discusses each of these. The first and last classes are self-explanatory; The Little Tailor is the story of the man who succeeds or fails spectacularly." I picked the man-who-learned-better, with a small side-order of boy-meets-girl (or rather, gynoid-girl-

meets-android-butler).

But the storytelling tools are only part of the story; of much more interest is what you do with them, and the way theme emerges from the intersection of plot and character against a complex background. (Example: you're going to see a very different theme emerging from a boy-meets-girl story if you make one of them Jewish and the other German, and the setting is Berlin, depending on whether you set the story in 1939 or 1989. Same characters, same city, same core storyline, but *totally* different messages emerge!)

***Saturn's Children* is quite subversive in the way that it refutes the bulk of Space Opera by suggesting that humans aren't well equipped for space exploration. And, for a book with no humans, it has wildly explicit sexual vision.**

Au contraire: the characters in *Saturn's Children* are all human – insofar as they're the products of human culture and human consciousness running on more-or-less humanoid bodies. But the background conceit (that they're robots, built to be slaves) lets us put a whole different spin on

the story, exploring issues of free will and determinism in the context of a society that explicitly rejects the enlightenment program's normative assumption that all human lives are equally valuable.

As for humans being ill-equipped for space exploration – we're ill-equipped for *Earth* exploration! 70% of our world's surface is water, and about 50% of the rest is uninhabitable. Drop a naked human on 95% of our planet's surface and they'll die within a day. And that's the biosphere we coevolved with!

I don't want to over-egg the pudding; we will probably manage to eventually send a few hardy explorers to Mars, or even further out, at great cost. But the idea of unmodified humans *settling* other planets is right up there with heavier-than-air flight: we don't have wings, so we're going to have to develop some pretty exotic technologies before it's possible. And before we've figured out how to do much more than jump off a hill while holding onto a glider (which is about the stage we're at, space-travel wise) it's not obvious that we're going to go there – the economic and technological cases have not been made.





### YEAR'S BEST FANTASY 8

eds David G. Hartwell & Kathryn Cramer

Tachyon tpb, 384pp, \$14.95

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

Is it just me, or was 2007 one of the better years for fantasy short fiction we've had for a while? Certainly, *Year's Best Fantasy 8* manages to include more outright good stories than has become usual in these Best of the Year anthologies. The book contains 23 stories, and a good dozen or more of them stand out as excellent examples of the genre. That's a hit rate I can't remember encountering in years.

Let's try and pull a few general themes from the mix. To start with, authors who tend to write long epic novels (Tad Williams, 'The Stranger's Hands'; Garth Nix, 'Sir Hereward and Mister Fitz Go to War Again') also seem to write long stories, and in both cases a little judicious editing would not have come amiss. But this doesn't always hold true. Michael Moorcock, whose recent fiction seems to have grown ever more self-indulgent, here contributes a story, 'A Portrait in Ivory', that is tight, restrained, and powerfully effective.

All three of these, and a good number of others, follow the generic fantasy norm of wizards and swordsmen and gods and a vaguely medieval setting (Moorcock's is yet another Elric story). As always, with such tales, part of the point is that they follow a familiar pattern, feature a bit of derring-do or clever wizardry from the protagonist, and

build to a (sometimes) ironic climax. But there are instances that can conform to the pattern and still wring something new from the mix, such as Kage Baker's 'The Ruby Incomparable' in which the child of magical parents seeks power and finds motherhood.

The past features a lot in these stories, usually pseudo-medieval ('Dance of Shadows' by Fred Chappell is a neat idea about collecting shadows, though it could have done with more thought about story), though not always. There's a vividly realised Celtic Twilight in 'Debatable Lands' by Liz Williams, even if the story doesn't quite live up to the power of the setting. After the Middle Ages the next favourite period for fantasy seems to be the age of Elizabeth, here represented by Mark Chadbourn's 'Who Slays the Gyant, Wounds the Beast'. This also utilises another common characteristic of this collection, the breakdown of the interface between story and reality. In Chadbourn's case, Edmund Spenser falls in love with his Faerie Queen, and unleashes hell, a rather crude variant on the theme compared, say, to 'Unpossible' by Daryl Gregory in which a middle-aged man tries to return to Never-Never Land. But even this pales beside 'Paper Cuts Scissors' by Holly Black, a wonderfully realised tale of people entering and leaving books, and what happens to the readers they leave behind.

There are some attempts to engage with other cultures, touchingly in Bruce McAllister's 'Poison' in which a little boy confronts the Italian witch who killed his cat, more cynically in 'The King of the Djinn' by

David Ackert and Benjamin Rosenbaum about a confrontation between Islamic faith and brute American power. But the best of the stories stay close to home. Some, for instance, use folk tales rather transparently to comment on contemporary issues, as for instance 'Don't Ask' by M. Rickert in which children abducted by wolves clearly stand in for children going into the army. Others tap into different aspects of culture, such as Andy Duncan's 'A Diorama of the Infernal Regions, or the Devil's Ninth Question', a broken-backed tale set partly in an old-fashioned carny show and partly in the Winchester Mystery House, the latter part being the more interesting.

Though many of the stories engage, entertainingly or not, with the conventions of fantasy, the very best work against convention to provide an unexpected perspective on things we thought we knew well. Pat Cadigan does this superbly with 'Stilled Life' in which the immobile human statues we see around London provide a powerful metaphor for the emptiness of contemporary urban life. It's a wonderful story matched only by Elizabeth Hand's 'Winter's Wife', in which an Icelandic wife brought to the wilds of rural Maine proves a disturbing champion in the fight against thoughtless modern development. If science fiction is about keeping up with the present, fantasy would, in this evidence, seem to be about the way, for good or ill, the past haunts the present. And more than any fantasy collection I've read in a good while, there are stories here that will haunt me for some time to come.

### THE PAINTED MAN

Peter Brett

HarperVoyager hb, 542 pp, £14.99

Reviewed by Iain Emsley

This novel begins Peter Brett's debut series and it is an intriguing read which preys on the fear of the night in a series of isolated communities linked by messengers.

In Tibbet's Brook, demons plague the night whilst the humans cower behind wards. Arlen is an eleven-year-old boy when he begins to fight. Rojer, training to be a juggler, leaves his drunken master and leaves the city whilst Leesha, a trainee herbalist, comes into contact with a wise woman who teaches her medicine. As all three characters leave their own worlds and travel into the world, they lose their identities. Leesha rebels against her mother's choices for her and Rojer learns to trust his

own talent and ignore the paths of others. The journey is one of losing childhood and gaining maturity. Arlen, on the other hand, changes his identity entirely and expands the world. His choice of messenger career means that he travels to the big cities with their tired corruption and the Arabian inspired Krasian desert's exhausted ritual. All seek the one Deliverer, promised to send the demons back to the core. In parts this is the rebuilding of a fractured world but one which is eerily similar to our own.

Brett's novel starts slowly but it builds a terrifying and exhilarating pace which is reminiscent of David Gemmell or Raymond Feist but promises a slightly greater depth of character. There are one or two things which do rankle but I hope that these will be sorted out in later. Perhaps *The Painted Man* retreads epic fantasy ground but it does with a verve and care that is highly readable and promises the start of a fine career.



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## Mutant Popcorn Nick Lowe



The war is on. Everything we've grown up to believe sacred in film – script, character, plot, acting – is under attack from a zombie army of computer-generated automata seeking the extinction of all humanity and the total mechanisation of narrative. Slowly but surely, the storyboard is displacing the traditional screenplay at the blockbuster end of the industry, with the major summer genres – action comedy, family animation, the all-conquering superhero film – constructed around unscriptable visual set pieces created mostly inside computers, with dramatic dialogue demoted to an afterthought. Already there are credited “screenwriters” (Zack Snyder’s byline on *300* comes to mind) who do their work entirely in pictures, authoring entire films without typing a word of screenplay. And the more the summer genres dominate the industry, the more their distinctive kind of gamelike minimalist autoplotting takes over from traditional structures of human motivation and causality.

In this respect, the most highly-evolved film of the summer has to be **Wall•E**, which goes further than anything yet seen on this scale in abandoning the primitive crutches of script and character in favour of pure storyboarding and a toylike sub-anthropomorphism. A film of often breathtaking beauty that homages ‘But Who Can Replace a Man?’ just distantly enough not to have to write Aldiss anything resembling an actual cheque, *Wall•E* domesticates, sentimentalises, and ultimately neuters one of the greatest of all science-fictional themes, the elegiac vision of a post-human world, populated here by the last functioning garbage bot and what appears to be the last surviving cockroach. Right from the start, we have to be reassured that the end of human tenure of this world is reversible: that humanity hasn’t passed into the dark altogether, but merely

abandoned earth for the stars. And most of the film turns out to take place not on the deserted Earth but on a deep-space ark to which humanity has retreated and adapted after “rising toxicity levels have made life unsustainable on Earth”, and which turns out to be a giant McGuffin-fuelled ending machine that merely requires the object of pursuit to be inserted in the space of quest, and centuries-old plot machinery will whirl into life and deliver the entire salvation of humanity on literal autopilot.

As science fiction, it all makes about as much sense as it sounds, and even as cartoon plotting it’s pretty rudimentary, with the corporate villain “Buy ‘N’ Large” never called to account at all for the depopulation of Earth and the theft of seven centuries of human history. Yet its images of deserted Earth and interstellar space are viscerally beautiful and moving, and the robot leads are dazzling creations, their minimal faces and crude desktop voices throwing all the weight of expression on to the animators’ powers of mime. Wall•E’s spaniel ET eyes at least give him something to work with, but when you first see Eve you wonder how any individuality or emotion can ever be evoked for an Apple-white swing-bin with two blank ovals for a face. Yet this is precisely the point. These are characters for whom you feel as you feel for toys, and their artful single-mindedness and inarticulacy is a breakthrough in stripping characterisation down to the elementary filmic needs while eliciting a huge investment of emotional projection and engagement from the audience, so that Wall•E’s poignant Macintosh startup chord can carry more primitive emotion than anything in the summer’s human pile. Wall•E’s mission is to teach his makers how to be human again. But the effect of the film is likely to be the reverse.



The frontline in the war between script and storyboard remains the superhero film, where the summer of 2008 sees the return of two breakout masters to their respective blockbuster franchises after sensational genre-defying one-offs in the space between, with more creative control and ambitions to reinvent the comics movie as a kind of macrobudget artfilm. Written back-to-back with *Pan’s Labyrinth*, but designed and shot in its slipstream, Guillermo del Toro’s **Hellboy II: The Golden Army** is essentially a big-budget vehicle for the same visual and narrative obsessions, but with vastly more resources and vastly less requirement to make this-worldly sense. Del Toro’s script has moved outside the canon of Mike Mignola’s story archive to build an original tale out of the pair’s shared interest in dark folklore, with an ending that breaks continuity with the comics altogether, and a rudimentary, dreamlike plot that now resembles one of del Toro’s trademark clockwork mechanisms, now a kind of faerietale free association. The trail of drafts shows that it was actually in origin a much more written, less storyboarded film than the one we finally see on screen, but that the post-script process has if anything generated the best material (including the sequences that culminate respectively in the punchlines “It’s Friday” and “I’m not a baby; I’m a tumour”); while the great goblin market scene, the film’s most gobsmacking showcase for del Toro’s visual imagination, started out as the bare stage direction “cadres of Lovecraftian entities stroll about”. It looks extraordinary, and Mignola’s bizarre characters are once again handled with huge affection, even if *Pan’s* fans are likely to be baffled and infuriated by the unapologetic turn to a cinema of subhuman noise, spectacle, and comicsy action and bombast.



Quite different is summer colossus **The Dark Knight**, Christopher Nolan's hugely ambitious attempt to reclaim the moral and intellectual seriousness of the superhero blockbuster, with elegant, balletic plot turns and moral pirouettes that you can't but admire as formal artifice whatever your view of the film's overall achievement. One thought you simply have to leave at the door is the one about the director of *Memento* and *The Prestige* doing bloody Batman films; Nolan is clearly as serious about Batman as del Toro has been about Blade and Hellboy, and one of the provocations of *The Prestige* is that it doesn't do to be sniffy about genre. (There's still a substantial online lynch-mob of people so shocked by that film's genre violations that they prefer to argue that the sf element is an illusion.) *The Dark Knight* is absolutely committed to the brave idea that superhero narrative can say meaningful things about the nature of evil that no other genre can articulate, that the Batman mythos can indeed address big urban issues about institutional and citizen responses to organised crime or terrorism, and above all that supervillains are morally and politically interesting figures in ways that all previous superhero cinema has culpably failed to take seriously. The Nolan brothers' big idea here has been to pull David Goyer's original blueprints for films two and three into a single narrative with a *Prestige*-style initial promise to bring about the truly astonishing: to turn Aaron Eckhart's charismatic, Hollywood-heroic "white knight" Harvey Dent into the double of the Joker we know from canon he will become, and to make this happen through the actions of Batman himself. It has to be said that the transformation, when it comes, doesn't quite carry the moral and psychological conviction it needs to, and that the Nolans' ambitions, like their hero's, are nobler than the results. But it's refreshing to be able to feel any sense of moral excitement about a superhero film, and if its aspiration to be *The Wire* of comics movies turns out to be overreach, Nolan's sheer sense of the empoweredness of the genre is infectious and inspiring in itself.



The season's other superhero hit has been a spectacular demonstration of the power of Will Smith's people to raise the dead, resurrecting lifeless projects like *I am Legend* from the grave of turnaround and breathing a mysterious spark of life into them that enables the resulting mishmash to do inexplicably well with the paying public.

Now they're at it again with the strange film that arrives as **Hancock**, but which began its long taxi down the Hollywood runway in 1996 as a famous unfilmable script by Vincent Ngo under the title *Tonight, He Comes*, of which little survives in *Hancock* beyond the titular alcoholic superhero and the gag about bashing into billboards.

Making *Hancock* fly has involved some fairly serious time in development rehab, and it's perhaps no surprise that the eventual film retells the story of its own refashioning, the grooming of Ngo's self-destructive and seemingly irredeemable character into the pilot of a family-friendly Will Smith vehicle.

In this version, Hancock is taken in hand by Jason Bateman's idealistic PR man (no irony) for an image makeover in which he's sent to jail to dry his reputation out, and released into the community to rebuild his relationship with the public by cleaning up the crimewave that has broken out while he's been off the mean streets, and tackling the criminal mastermind who's emerged as his super-nemesis.

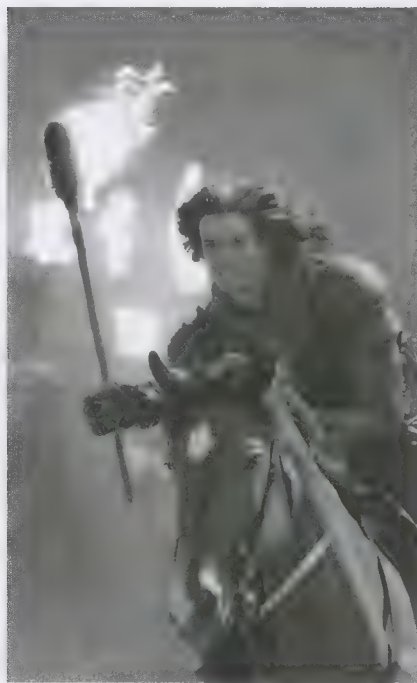
All this is gently if unsensationally entertaining on its terms, with Smith extremely well displayed in the role – until a startling plot aneurysm propels the film violently into what is essentially a sequel by other hands, with Hancock coming belatedly out as an amnesiac immortal, and confronting questions Ngo left pointedly unasked about his backstory to build an entire (and literal) superhero mythology around what must be the most spectacularly unintelligent piece of evolutionary design ever posited in superhero Darwinics.

Charlize Theron, terrific in the first half as the straight character who refuses to play along with the lightened tone, gets possessed by a deranged plot demon that overwrites her reason and motivation, and the film ends up embracing all the noise and cliché that the original script was picked up for resisting.





But we need to remember that these super-people are basically robot animations themselves, and "Will Smith" merely the visible face of a sophisticated machine dedicated to maintaining its CEO's state of box-office primacy, playing down his flirtations with Scientology and installing him in vehicles that will advance his plan of global domination. This truth is played out with particular forcefulness in **Meet Dave**, which reveals that the entity we know as Eddie Murphy is actually a complex vessel of artifice piloted by a vast unseen crew of little people under the general command of Murphy himself, but with the ever-present threat of mutiny if the captain doesn't stick to his mission of ruthlessly draining our world's resources to power his own emotionless homeworld. A numskull comedy in the *Beezer* sense, it's been crashlandingly received by adult humans, but in truth is a perfectly amusing and effective kids' film, vastly more sittable through than most of Murphy's recent canon, and refreshingly light on the emotional gloop that gummed up the *Nutty Professor* films in particular. Its 90-minute running time has the feel of a longer film savagely cut, unless it simply never made sense in the first place. But the slapstick is as ably storyboarded as it needs to be, and even the age-targeted toilet humour is partly exonerated by a resonant scene in which the white-suited, gurning interstellar Murphy machine stoops down and defecates cash. Like it or not, it's what he does.



In any case, posh literary kids' films can hardly claim better behaviour; it's a wonder Lucy Pevensie hasn't been had up before the knife tsar, so pervasive are edged weapons in schoolkid hands in **The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian**. Like its predecessor, this is a fairly uncomfortable experience, tiptoeing around the numinous Anglicanism (Lucy's first meeting with Aslan is now just a dream), and trying to grow the story up a bit in ways that only highlight the novels' uneasy displacement of adult themes. The film finds an interesting partial solution in the Pevensies' lingering memories of having once been adults and of having lived entire lives before being returned to the childhood from which they started, and a newly grown-up Caspian who is both older and yet immeasurably younger. But the chaste final snog with Susan raises queasy memories of what her dawning adult sexuality is going to lead to in *The Last Battle*, and the focus on action over religion, with a completely new battle episode bringing the Pevensies into Caspian's barely-narrated campaign in chapter 7, only highlights the unsettling spectacle of child soldiers slaughtering infidels in a guerrilla war of the native Narnians against the imperialist Telmarine conquistadores. There are many fine moments, and Ben Barnes and Peter Dinklage are both terrific assets to the cast, but *Dawn Treader* is going to need to be a very different kind of film to do anything like justice to the series' crown jewels.

Since their first Narnia film Walden Media have built up a substantial portfolio of earnest adaptations of K-12 standards from *Charlotte's Web* to *Nim's Island*. But their new **Journey to the Centre of the Earth** is a different proposition, starting as it does from the expectation that nobody actually reads the novel any more. ("I think that was on my summer reading list once," says Josh Hutcherson's troubled teen to uncle Brendan Fraser; "never got to it.") The film's inspired solution is to treat Verne as its own Arne Saknussemm, using the novel as the Baedeker to the underworld for a modern retread which follows the narrative topography with a present-day cast traversing the map to experience the famous set pieces afresh, only now in 3D. One touch of pure genius is to replace Verne's professor with his blonde Icelandic action-babe daughter, and then spend the rest of the film taking geothermal temperature readings on how many layers of clothing she has to shed and how many buttons to undo. There's a solemn attempt to make the obligatory Walden familial baggage out of Hutcherson's dad having been killed by a 3D T Rex, and the credited geological consultant is unlikely to be happy to see his name on the result, given that the climax alone requires a deposit of cold water in an active volcano whose walls are veined with metallic magnesium.

For *Journey's* sequel-pitch coda Fraser brandishes a copy of Ignatius Donnelly's *Atlantis*, which would be a lot of fun if Disney hadn't got there first, and immeasurably more appealing than a further instalment of Fraser's current expiring franchise. **The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor** breezes off with the season's hotly contested wooden spoon,





for managing against all odds to make a duff film about Ballard-era Shanghai, the Emperor Qin Shi Huang (Jet Li, whose *Hero* is cheekily replayed as chamber drama in the prologue), Shangri-La, stunt yetis, Michelle Yeoh as an immortal sorceress, and an undead terracotta army battling a Harryhausen legion of skeletons in the shadow of the Great Wall. Franchise showrunner Stephen Sommers has farmed out the eventual script and direction, but seems to have kept an iron producer's grip which has pretty much throttled the finished product. Rachel Weisz's Evelyn, the first film's star turn, has been recast with what one can only call a vengeance, following her visible struggles in the second film to work with Sommers' punitive reinterpretation of her original character. Now, reincarnated in the body of Maria Bello, we see the hideous thing the franchise always wanted its yummiest mummy to become: a triangular-jawed glamour mom with a thumpingly fake English accent in which she tries to deliver lines like "There's something incredibly romantic about vanquishing the undead", and who has renounced her academic vocation to be a pulp romantic adventure novelist instead. Also recast is offspring Alex, now grown up and mysteriously turned American since the previous film and indeed the early drafts of this one (which were set in 1940 rather than 1946, with a Japanese villain, and made at least a token attempt to incorporate some real Chinese history), and some truly awful father-son tension that wasn't there at all in the 2005 draft. The game plan was to cash in Fraser's three-picture contract and resurrect the franchise with O'Connell junior in the lead. Good luck with that.



It's strange to think that when the last *Mummy* film came out *The X-Files* was still on TV, though many would feel it had been stumbling around in bandages for some seasons before the end. That may be why **The X-Files: I Want to Believe** sidelines its increasingly overloaded conspiracy mythos, choosing instead for its wake-from-sleep a deliberately low-key standalone story which showcases its still-bankable leads doing what they did best. Viewers who gave up on the series during its bumpy final seasons may be left a bit behind on the shipper-friendly developments in the late-phase Mulder-Scully partnership six years back, dealt with here with a pleasing casualness and obliquity, though if you don't know who William was the passing mention here will just leave you more bemused. But David Duchovny in particular is on such winning

form that you almost manage to overlook the smug, patronising always-rightness that this film continues to promote in his dealings with the long-suffering Scully. The actual plot is a daft and leaky backstreet surgical bodge-up of Boileau & Narcejac's *Choice Cuts* with paranormal paedo melodrama, with Amanda Peet particularly preposterous as a young Fed who signals her X-philia and general freethinking by leaving *three buttons* undone on her blouse. If it doesn't really do justice to what was effective about the early seasons and indeed the first film, at least it amply recaptures what was so beguilingly silly. A moment they should have resisted, but delightfully didn't, is the snatch of theme played over a portrait of George W. Bush. I'm sure God can find it in his heart to forgive them the 37 sodomised choirboys for that.

More paranormal government mischief in **The Mist**, which reunites Frank Darabont's favourite novelist with Stephen King's favourite director in a long-mooted adaptation of King's 1980 novella about a supermarket full of shoppers under siege from an unknown Lovecraftian presence outside and their own collective demons within. It's all done with rather more respect than the story really merits, with only light updates (the *Spider-Man* and *Hulk* comics King's hero grabs for his son have been replaced in the film version by *Hellboy*), though Darabont goes a bit further into the nature of the secret military project that has unleashed the mist and its denizens on our world, while oddly dispensing with King's careful rationalisation of the mistlings' behaviour as scent-driven. The biggest challenge has been King's unfilmable conclusion, which had the narrator reflect on the range of possible endings before leaving his manuscript behind and driving on to an unknown fate. Darabont's solution picks up instead on an earlier outcome discarded by the narrator, and allows the story a kind of closure with a sting in the tail that is only possible in a film adaptation where the audience don't have as much time to say "Hang on a minute" as they would on the printed page. But the Bernie Wrightson creature design is effective, and it's all an impressive demonstration of what can be done with one set, a smoke machine, and a cracking ensemble of every character actor in the state of Maine (actually Shreveport, LO, but that's what the mist is for).

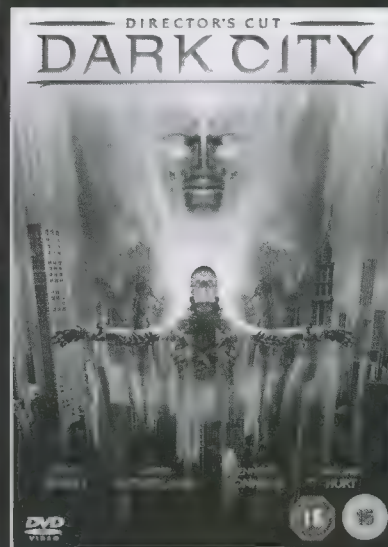




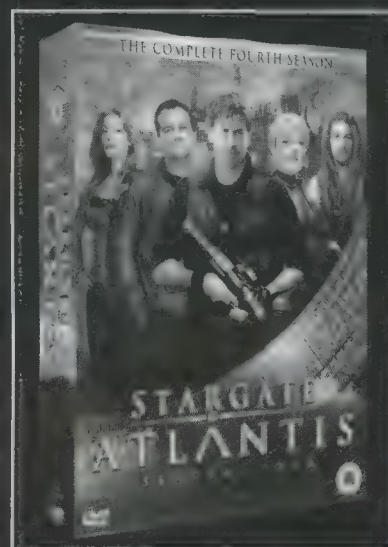
King has been the big celebrity champion of novelist and screenwriter Scott Smith, who made a splashy screenwriting debut a decade ago with his adaptation for Sam Raimi of his first novel *A Simple Plan*, so it's surprising that it's taken him so long to resurface. But in truth, Smith's screen version of his second novel **The Ruins**, a jolly horror pulp about American tourists being nastily harvested by man-eating Mexican plants, isn't immediately recognisable as the work of the same imagination, except perhaps in the classical purity of its plot engine (there, a suitcase of cash; here, a carnivorous Mayan pyramid). It has the same deft sense of seemingly small missteps spiralling grimly till one or fewer survivors remain – the book and the film choose different paths here, as more puzzlingly do the beginning and end of the film itself – and plays well on Americans' nervousness of travel, especially off the beaten path, in contrast to the crazy Europeans who throw themselves into the path of risk and drag the sensible ones with them. Stay in the hotel, chaps. It's triffids out there.

A more private kind of man-eating is the subject of horror parable **Teeth**, in which the school chastity-pledge cheerleader discovers herself to be intimately dentated and able to wreak a series of gruesome revenges on the uniformly worthless males who thrust themselves on and in her. A surprisingly dark and misandric storyline sees its heroine transformed by serial male abuse from a brightly fatuous innocent to a demonic sexual vigilante, a development tricked out in meretricious mythical flimflam ("springs from primitive male dread...imagines sexual intercourse as a mythic journey...the hero must do battle with the woman, the toothed creature, and break her power") illustrated with that 21st-century expository standby, the fabricated Google page, and clips of the money shot from Hammer's *The Gorgon*. Camille Paglia is thanked at the end, with a disclaimer that "No man was harmed in the making of this film" – though it's debatable whether the cause of female deobjectification is really served by a film built entirely around moments where people stick things in a blonde teenager's ladyparts. There's some rather apologetic Darwinian handwaving about "adaptation", but it feels more like a preemptive remake of a Japanese or Korean film that hasn't yet been made. Perhaps that's how films need to evolve now, as the machines rise up and the knights grow ever darker. **Nick Lowe**

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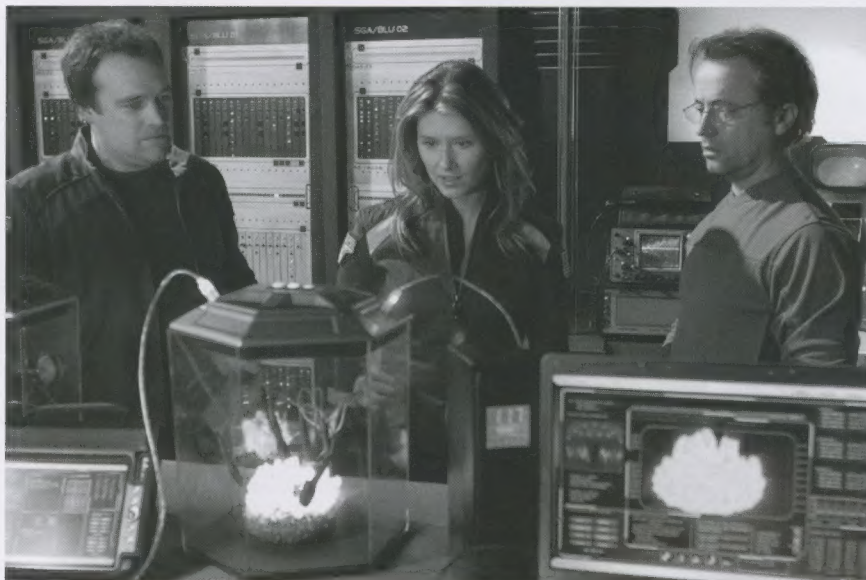
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## Laser Fodder Tony Lee



Not being an admirer of the cheesy *Stargate SG-1* (1997-2007), I approached recent spin-off movie *Stargate: The Ark of Truth* with some trepidation, and soon found its readily conclusionary storytelling a wince-inducing mix of portentous waffle and trivial asides, muddled up with boringly fannish in-jokes to suit only true aficionados of this dialup-teleport adventure. Now, the Replicators are coming, the Wraith are here – in **Stargate: Atlantis** season four (4 August), where both episodic and season-arc plot kits are delivered with some self-assembly required, if (like me?) you've missed nearly all previous seasons, but there's really nothing much in this despairingly conventional comedy-drama beyond average TV brainwork. It's not a space opera likely to stretch, or fire, any jaded SF fan's imagination. US diplomat Elizabeth Weir (Torri Higginson, *Airborne*) and macho John Sheppard (cocksure wooden-top Joe Flanigan, from *SG-1* episode *Pegasus Project*) are unfortunately teamed with blustering genius Dr Rodney McKay (Briton playing Canadian, David Hewlett, yet another crossover from *SG-1*) in a simplistic genre adventure series, where human pioneers in the Pegasus galaxy pick up fighting allies Teyla (Rachel Luttrell, pregnant this season), and hulking dreadlock Klingon-type Ronon (Jason Momoa), from local races. Jewel Staite (*Firefly*, *Serenity*) graduates from space hick to hospital chick as the city's doctor, Jill Wagner (*Blade* TV series) has a recurring femme fatale role, Robert Picardo (*Star Trek: Voyager*) is fine as tetchy bureaucrat

Woolsey, and starship commander Mitch Pileggi (*The X-Files*) is top Colonel among the colonels, while Kari Wuhrer (*Sliders*) plays Sheppard's ex-wife during an Earth mission. Apart from such recognisable names or faces imported from other genre shows, *Atlantis*' creators Brad Wright and Robert C. Cooper borrow ideas from assorted pulpy SF sources, both print and media. James Blish may have blushed or blanched seeing mythical Atlantis presented as ultimate 'city-in-flight'. Many long-time fans will cringe at blah notions or hoary clichés lifted from *Space 1999*, *Crusade*, *Star Trek: TNG* and *DS9*, *Battlestar Galactica* (old series, not remake), *Andromeda*, *Battlefield: Earth*, and other skiffy tripe of even poorer quality.

Lost in a raid, city boss Dr Weir is replaced by promoted *SG-1* favourite Sam Carter (Amanda Tapping, *Sanctuary*), and Weir returns only briefly, when nanotech body-repairs even perfectly re-grow her hairdo after her brain surgery head-shave. Oh yes, it's lucky those alien medical 'bots were compatible with her chic professional style! Struggles for victory over alien foes continue, via hyperspace wormhole starships or macro-switch gate travel across galaxies, as *Atlantis*' nonchalant crew find a suitably hospitable planet, one that boasts multiple moons but a seemingly tideless ocean, to splashdown in and then just float, as peacefully utopian CGI rendering. Trouble with warfare strategy and science failures boils away complacency, however. David Ogden Stiers stares balefully as Borg king (sorry, Replicators' leader) Oberoth.

With cloning available to mutant Wraith scientists, Paul McGillion reprises his *Atlantis* role as Dr Carson Beckett. Mark Dacascos pops up during one quest, but with roguish duplicity in mind. Sheppard & Co visit inhabited planets with societies that fall into categories usually associated with traditional fantasy: tribal villages, royal castles, trade camps, sleepy hamlets, frontier settlements, etc. Too many pre-industrial worlds are pinged or punk'd with lamentable harmlessness, as these neo-Atlanteans don't pause to fret about *Trek*'s noble 'prime directive'. Risky mission profiles, so hurriedly debated, go ahead regardless, with the show's leads return assured by contractual obligation. No concern is wasted on disposable extras. Even with a killer-android loose on Earth, in *Outcast*, military secrecy about Stargate Command's projects is rarely compromised. (Obviously, Straker's SHADO in *UFO* had it too easy!) The besieged space station in episode *Midway* turns into a *Die Hard* spoof, with Ronon and visiting mentor Teal'c (Christopher Judge, plus wild hair) shooting up hordes of anonymous baddies when they follow invaders back to our spacer heroes' Cheyenne Mountain stronghold. The season's highlight involves an experimental weapon deployment where McKay makes friendly android FRAN (Michelle Morgan, *Diary of the Dead*), to launch cataclysmic genocide that begins poetically with 'hello'. Recourse to bantering sketches (Sheppard and McKay discuss Hollywood celebs who played *Batman* villains), and geek-friendly one-liners ("Just once, I would like to be taken prisoner by the sexy alien!") habitually undermine the credibility of any obvious 'dramatic' scenes – whether physical ordeals, worrisome threats, moral dilemmas, or ethical problem solving. Although it narrowly avoids becoming pompous like many *Trek* episodes, a generalised tone of irreverence works against *Atlantis* whenever a thriller scenario attempts a serious moment. Even bloodthirsty marauders crack jokes here. *This Mortal Coil* posits an Atlantis knockoff filled with body-snatcher residents, but then fluffs even weakly phildickian surprises. Revelations about the Wraith's evolved-insect hives should be absolutely horrific, but serve barely significant chills. Season finale timewarp *The Last Man* has a thoroughly predictable cliffhanger ending. Change is unlikely. Death seems irrelevant.





With 1994's original *Stargate* flick now available on blu-ray, **Stargate Continuum** (18 August) expands upon, or at least belabours, this lame-duck Flash Gordon legacy. Observing the ceremonial execution of a terrible alien menace, the SG-1 team start to vanish when the enemy's desperate endgame rewrites history so that Earth's stargate programme never existed, the portal lost in an "unfortunate boating accident" before WWII, resulting in a blandly vanilla timeline – without zero point energy, interstellar police work, cosmic hitchhiker guides, and no sign of a Kwisatz Haderach. Following some unpleasantness with disbelieving officialdom, Carter – the unstoppable shucks machine (Tapping is too mumsy for a sci-fi action heroine – as even in khaki combat gear she looks and acts eager to put the kettle on and pour tea), and chums Mitchell (*Farscape* refugee Ben Browder), and Doc Jackson (Michael Shanks, a dismal player compared to James Spader's movie characterisation), are sworn to keep schtum, and granted cover-up identities under some witless protection scheme. Later on, called to Washington to advise the President (William Devane, keenly playing a parallel-world version of his *SG-1* guest role), the reunited Carter, Mitchell, and one-legged Jackson, warn authorities that UFO sightings herald an invasion by Lord Ba'al, whose orbiting fleet brings pyramid power blues to the sky. Will Carter's ad-hoc ops release typically grim-faced Teal'c from upper-echelon slavery, thwart the system-queen treachery of Qetesh (Claudia Black, embarrassingly camp *Farscape* survivor), and give Mitchell a chance to meet his grandfather and put history to rights? Measured against the mind-boggling complexities of many notable time paradox stories, the contrasts and ironies depicted are shamefully basic. There's nothing to make logic squirm, as momentarily fateful conundrums and offbeat plot reversals in many better subgenre texts demand. *Stargate* newbies may be left wondering exactly what in the name of Goa'uld is going on here ("Seriously, who would make this shit up!?"), but it's clearly nothing new and so hardly worth fussing over fuzzy details.



Down with the metal! A storm is coming... Picking up from where blockbuster sequel and CGI-milestone *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991) left off, **Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles** (11 August), developed for television by Josh Friedman (who co-wrote Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* remake), is limited to nine episodes of gloomy twisted-family drama, centred on trials and tribulations of mother-of-destiny Sarah (always wonderful Lena Headey, *The Cave*, *Brothers Grimm*), and luckless son John (Thomas Dekker, Zach in *Heroes*), desperate survivors building a fragile web of conspiratorial relationships before the predicted Armageddon of 2011. Holding back the seemingly inevitable 'singularity' of malevolent artificial intelligence is no simple task. Time-travel from 1999 to 2007 means the Connors' duo missed world-changing millennial events like 11th September, which throws a spanner into the crude future-history of Jonathan Mostow's *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (2003), shunting that lacklustre sequel's apocalyptic plot into an alternate timeline. With "scary robot" Cameron (Summer Glau, *Firefly*, *Serenity*), and an FBI agent called Ellison (Richard T. Jones), the director of, and acknowledged SF influence on, *The Terminator* (1984) are honoured with in-joke name-checks. The producers awarded most of the cyborg-bashing scenes to feisty Sarah and femme golem Cameron, and the 15-year-old John

is only dangerous as hacker techie, so for macho balance there's Kyle's brother Derek Reese (Brian Austin Green, *Beverly Hills 90210*), another war veteran sent back from the future by resistance-leader John, to help defend his younger-self from homicidal attacks. However, eschewing the non-stop running of a standard chase, our fugitives don't wait for mecha troubles to find them. Urged by John's emerging independence, they start fighting back, trusting support characters, including forger Enrique (Tony Amendola, *Stargate SG-1*), Miles Dyson's widow Terissa (recast since *T2*) and, most importantly, Sarah's abandoned fiancé Charley Dixon (Dean Winters, *Rescue Me*), a paramedic who helps save the wounded Derek's life, and comes to share the Connors' felonious secrets, and dreadful suspicions about Cyberdyne and Skynet.

With a moral compass pointing to daylight bank robbery, chasing after stolen alloys and disabling the city's traffic lights, Sarah's proactive leadership tends to resemble terrorism. Genre regular Bruce Davison (*The Lathe of Heaven*, *X-Men* movies, *The Triangle*, Stephen King's *Kingdom Hospital*) is a noteworthy guest star, as paranoid recluse Dr Silberman, taking over this memorable role from retired actor Earl Boen, who appeared in the movie trilogy. Other supporting players include hulking British export Craig Fairbrass (*EastEnders*, *Beyond Bedlam*, *White Noise 2*), and Catherine Dent (Ringo Lam's *Replicant*, TV cop show *The Shield*), both perfectly cast in small parts. With intriguing subplots about every new friend's potential for betrayal, chess-playing computers (*The Turk* and *Queen's Gambit*), reverse-flashbacks to a ruined-future where Derek was captured by one curiously merciful terminator, and the elfin Glau going to ballet practice while toggling effortlessly to slaughter-matic mode, this needlessly sprawling techno-chiller sadly fails to become the 'John & Sarah show' so many fans hoped for, expecting a similar emotional intensity that Michael Biehn and Linda Hamilton gave Kyle and Sarah in the cult-video original. Although lacking the sheer narrative energy which the first two movies delivered – and on vastly different scales, so the TV budget is no satisfactory excuse for the absence of genuine thrills – this low-key spin-off is definitely worth seeing if you particularly enjoyed the quieter character-building moments of the formidable Schwarzenegger pictures. Season two goes live in September. **Tony Lee**



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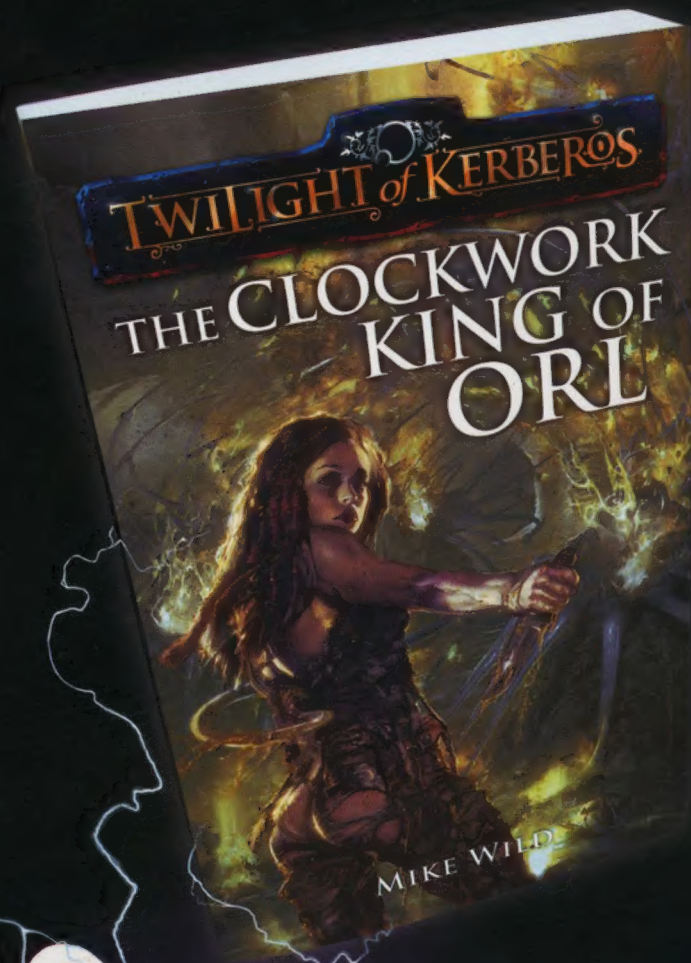
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